

The Mech Touch

Chapter 7221: Excessive Preparations

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The time had finally come to upgrade the Riot Mark III.

No more delays.

Ves found it difficult to set aside all of his other affairs and focus on completing the Riot Mark III Project.

Taking over the Phase Lord Department heaped a lot of responsibility on his shoulders. He had to supervise the transition to a new regime and make sure that the original members of the department got along well enough with the newcomers transferred from the other parts of the Red Collective.

The old guard and the new guard differed drastically from each other.

The former consisted of people who almost literally worshiped the Ascended Giants as their gods due to strange psychology. They were fanatically loyal to the object of their worship and frequently disagreed with the newcomers who sought to bring the Phase Lord Department back in line.

The latter therefore generated a lot of disruptions as they could not wait to bring everything back in compliance. Their refusal to acknowledge that the Ascended Giants were gods had already led to brief fistfights that immediately got interrupted when the security systems forcibly ended the scuffles.

The strategoi occasionally stepped in to defuse the tension, but their inclinations often caused them to neglect the mortals around them. It was difficult for them to bring themselves to care for whatever trivial matters kept the mortals occupied. They were little different from ants from the perspective of a human phase lord.

Ves needed to come up with a comprehensive plan to make the two sides coexist with each other. Perhaps it was too much to hope that they would meld into a single group, but he at least expected them to work together under a shared goal.

There were other matters that required his attention as well. The Secret Department sought to bring him up to speed, not even waiting for the big shots to increase his galactic citizenship tier.

After all, he had already become a department head by this time. That was the true reason why he became qualified to come into contact with highly classified information. He would need to take these hidden factors into account when he decided how to deploy his armed forces in the future.

It would be really detrimental for Ves to unknowingly ruin a master plan that dozens of other high-tiered galactic citizens relied upon!

While he was already looking forward to receiving the first of multiple intelligence briefings, Ves had nonetheless made the difficult decision to reschedule these appointments for another day.

There was no urgent need to widen his perspective and peel back the layer of fog that hid many truths.

"I am a mech designer first."

His status of department head was exalted, but he knew that he only managed to make it this far because he dedicated so much of his life towards mech design.

He had been straying too far into other activities. He still remembered the warning he received very early in his career about not letting his side activities surpass his main activity.

It did not matter if he became the polemarchos with a force of 359 Ascended Giants at his disposal today or the Holy 'Daughter' of the defunct Metal Shrine tomorrow.

In his heart, he was still the same old mech designer who started off with a humble second-hand 3D printer all the way in Cloudy Curtain.

To keep his true passion alive and well, Ves forcibly shoved aside all of his other responsibilities and planned to dedicate 7 whole days to the transformation and reinvention of the Riot Mark III.

This should be more than enough time to complete the transformation of the Riot Mark III and account for any unforeseen accidents and delays.

"Gloriana should be happy." He smiled.

One of the other reasons why he prioritized this job over others was to get himself in his wife's good books again.

It actually shamed him that he realized that his wife had been doing a better job of working as a mech designer than himself.

With a wife at his side who shared the same passion for mechs, Gloriana often served as his benchmark for success.

He always considered Gloriana to be a serious competitor. She might not be as versatile and creative as him, but she also had to deal with far fewer distractions due to her more focused and disciplined career trajectory.

This meant that she was constantly making progress towards becoming a Master Mech Designer.

Ves grew nervous at the thought of letting his wife become a Master Mech Designer first.

This was not supposed to happen!

Although Ves only wanted the best for his wife, his pride as a mech designer still treated her like a competitor!

"I can't lose this race."

Everything had already been prepared.

Gloriana had already upgraded and calibrated the production machines of her personal workshop.

She especially worked together with the Mech Supremacist Faction of the Red Association to develop customized machines that were able to produce archemetal a lot more effectively than standard machines.

She also made sure that they were rated to work with superdimensional matter, though this turned out to be a really difficult matter.

The production machines themselves had to be made with superdimensional matter as well, and that introduced its own complications.

Ves had not bothered to keep up with this development. All he understood was that this was still an ongoing issue.

It didn't matter. Partial progress was better than no progress. It should be considerably easier to fabricate a high-grade superdimensional mech than before.

Recent advancements in superdimensional theory as well as applications meant that the Riot Mark III was already technologically superior compared to the most recent First Sword Mark III.

Ketis had opted to make the latter without archetech for multiple reasons, but one of them was definitely because the Larkinsons had yet to figure out how to combine superdimensional alloy with archetech.

This problem no longer existed anymore. While the Resonance Smith had only given the bare minimum to Gloriana, she had spent enough time on mastering the initial teachings to be able to ensure consistent output.

It would take many years of research to refine the existing method and improve from this basis, but these were all future considerations.

For this particular project, Gloriana had meticulously updated the Riot Mark III design with the latest 'mature' specifications. The recent delays allowed her to refine and verify her work even further, thereby boosting her confidence in her solutions.

He could already spot her standing next to the old Riot Mark II.

The old expert mech had remained in a neglected state for a long time ever since he incurred significant damage.

The Larkinson mech designers decided that it was not worthwhile enough to repair the old and horrible outdated machine. It should have been much more convenient to upgrade him straight to his Mark III iteration.

In hindsight, perhaps they should have spent a few days on fixing up the mech frame so that he became functional enough to keep Venerable Orfan occupied after her recovery.

Due to numerous delays, she had spent way too many weeks with nothing to do aside from obsessing over her desired breakthrough.

This was not a healthy way for an expert pilot to spend her time!

Naturally, the expert pilot was already present, having entered the workshop earlier than everyone else.

She had waited too long for this. Her impatience was already boiling over.

Other mech designers were present as well, but most of them lacked the qualifications to assist with the work.

"Good morning, ladies."

"Good morning, Ves. Are you truly ready to complete this fabrication run?"

"Yes, honey. I have already consulted extensively with my assistant Gavin and my chief of staff Eliza. They will stall any incoming messages and postpone every matter that needs my consideration. The hastily reinforced Bluejay Fleet will no longer stay in Yernstall, but will instead begin its transit to the frontlines of the Rubarthan Pact. This will make it harder for others to get a hold of us. They can only contact us by remote."

His wife looked a little happier. "Good. What about your agreement with your other self?"

"The Dark Apostle will not insist on claiming his remaining quota for the entire week. He knows how important it is for me to devote my full attention to this fabrication run for the entire duration. As compensation, he is entitled to double his quota for the next week. I won't be around as much as the Dark Apostle will spend more time up and about at the Armitage. He won't stay in the Tarrasque as this ship is too 'small' for his stature."

The terms of this agreement did not surprise Gloriana. She already deduced this outcome. It was not particularly hard for her to do so as she only had to model the behavior of Ves with a braver but also stupider version of himself.

No one understood Ves better than himself... and Gloriana.

Ves turned his attention to the expert pilot and the ultimate recipient of the project. "Rosa. Do you understand your responsibilities?"

She nodded. "I have already heard about what you will do from the other pilots. I will just sit here, join this design network of yours and make sure you understand the Riot from my perspective."

"It is not strictly necessary for you to be present and awake for an entire week." Gloriana softly told her. "I have spent enough time on this project to learn how you approach your piloting and how to improve your fit with your battle partner."

"I still insist on staying and observing everything." Rosa said as her willpower surged again. "This is a matter of faith to me as far as I am concerned. I cannot bring myself to lose sight of the Riot before he has completed his makeover."

"Very well. If you insist. Just be aware that much of our work is highly technical. This will be a test of your patience."

Ves and Gloriana made their final checks, not that it was necessary.

They had already settled their children, who were permitted to visit the workshop compartment but knew better than to interrupt their parents when they were engrossed in their work.

The Larkinsons had also put in a request to borrow spare processor capacity to facilitate their work.

This will help make the production machines run smoother and work their way through errors and unforeseen situations faster.

The materials were also fully in order. Gloriana had not only made sure to obtain batches of high-grade materials of superior stock, but already conducted a limited degree of pre-processing in order to save time.

Of course, she made sure to leave the most important steps for the actual fabrication run.

This had practically become a ritual for the two. They refused to break up their fabrication run despite the mounting complexity and other challenges. Only through a single focused dedication did they gain the confidence of turning a highly complicated superdimensional archemec into a masterwork mech!

While Gloriana manifested Alexandria.

The companion spirit soon brought Ves, Venerable Orfan as well as Alexa Streon into her design network.

The Queen Cat did not extend any connections to other Larkinson mech designers who decided to observe the fabrication run.

It was a pity, but the EdNet returnees such as Juliet Stameross and Sara Voiken had little clue what to do with archetech and superdimensional matter. They needed to complete extra classes in order to master the minimum amount of knowledge that was necessary to become a useful contributor in these high-end projects!

Fortunately, the learning efficiency of these EdNet returnees were still high despite no longer benefiting from an accelerated virtual learning environment.

Their effective study habits, their powerful cranial implants and their recent adoption of auxiliary qi cultivation methods should allow them to pass the threshold in a month or two depending on their schedule.

This should turn them into effective contributors to all of their future high-end mech design projects, thereby allowing Ves and Gloriana to complete them faster!

Chapter 7222: What is a God of Mechs?

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The fabrication run began as soon as Vulcan descended onto Blinky and flooded the workshop with E energy.

Ves had decided to adopt a slightly different methodology when working to fabricate new components and piecing them together inside the existing mech frame of the Riot Mark II.

Previously, he and Vulcan worked fully in sync with each other to the point where it was difficult to distinguish their work.

This time, Ves wanted to maintain a greater mental separation from his external incarnation.

This would produce an outcome similar to how Ves had lingered by the Dark Apostle's side during the leadership challenge.

The reason for doing this was because he felt that adopting two different perspectives on the same work would yield greater insights and improvements.

While there was a greater chance for disagreements and coordination problems, Ves believed that this was an acceptable price to pay.

Unfortunately, the Riot Mark III was not the best mech design to try out this new approach.

The project had been delayed for a while, which gave Gloriana more time to plan out the fabrication process in meticulous detail.

The assignments she issued were all carefully calculated and modeled in advance.

She rarely made mistakes, so Ves did not have much of an opportunity to express his creativity, just as she intended.

Still, Ves benefited from having a second perspective nonetheless. Vulcan possessed a much vaster and more craftsmanship-oriented mind.

He regarded mechs as exquisite imitations and extrapolations of life.

They were amazingly complex and powerful machines that possessed amazing potential, far beyond other combat machines of the same scale.

As the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship, Vulcan not only possessed a deep understanding of mechs, but also made associations with them that Ves had not made.

The close relationship between mechs and mech pilots, the mountains of doctrines developed around the use of mechs, the myth-like status it managed to attain during the Age of Mechs and other factors all caused Vulcan to favor mechs above all other crafts.

It was difficult to define what exactly a 'God of Mechs' was supposed to do. Was he supposed to be a historian? Or was he an engineer? What about being a mech pilot?

Ves had deliberately kept this vague when he created Vulcan because he did not know the answer at the time. Not that he had gained much understanding in the years that had passed.

A part of Ves believed that a god of mechs should not even exist in the first place. How dare any spiritual entity claim dominion over mechs?

Not even the Star Designers dared to take ownership of the concept of mechs in such a complete fashion!

To Ves, mechs constituted a product that was as fundamental as earth and fire.

Pretender gods may come and claim dominion over them, but their authority only extended as far as they could project their power, which was always finite.

Ves did not mind that Vulcan claimed to be a God of Mechs among other things, but he should never abuse his false authority to interfere with how people interacted with mechs.

Therefore, mechs had always remained his weakest authority. Vulcan had made much more progress as a God of Dwarves and a God of Craftsmanship.

Though Ves also considered them to be false titles, Vulcan managed to accrue a lot of worshipers among dwarves and artisans.

What was also important was that his direct competition was weak when it came to these particular domains.

The Eternal Vulcan Empire directly succeeded the original Vulcan Empire. Both states revered Vulcan as the only god that stood up for the 'dwarven race'. The heavy gravity variant humans who originally came from many different parts of the Milky Way had mostly abandoned their original creeds and converted to the worship of the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship.

This was not only because it was the only sanctioned faith in the Eternal Vulcan Empire, but also because Vulcan occasionally manifested his existence!

From lending his power to the crown that adorned the head of the Iron Emperor to personally answering the prayers of the most earnest of dwarven worshipers, Vulcan expended a slight amount of his attention to acting as a responsible 'god'.

Of course, as a derivative of Ves, Vulcan did not truly consider himself a god. Yet. He was merely pretending to be one.

Yet a false god could still serve as an adequate service provider. Vulcan took his responsibilities seriously. He provided reassurance to his worshipers in exchange for their spiritual feedback. This was a fair transaction that benefited both sides. There was no need to overcomplicate this matter any further.

The dwarves were the most numerous and fanatical in their worship.

There were not as many artisans that also recognized Vulcan as their god, but the difference was that many of them were amazingly skilled, talented and experienced.

Vulcan had learned so much about craftsmanship from being able to observe and reproduce their methods.

This was also his most useful component to Ves. The ancestral spirit's deep insights into craftsmanship allowed him to spot numerous occasions where they could improvise a better solution.

Vulcan also gained more of an idea on how to transform the Riot Mark III into a better living mech and artifact.

This was of great importance as the Riot Mark III's transformation into a D-mech would initiate a confrontation between the original living mech and the demon that would attempt to usurp his place.

Ves naturally wanted the original living mech to win this life-and-death duel.

Even if the living mech eventually became contaminated by the malevolence of the defeated demon, the expert spearman mech at least retained a measure of continuity!

The question was how he could help stack the deck against the demon in question.

This was not going to be like his most recent D-arms that he Demoncasted in the days preceding the leadership challenge.

The Murder Knife and so on were all D-arms of the lowest order. Their physical mutations were relatively mild and their new 'artifact spirits' were as threatening as mewling kittens to Ves and the Dark Apostle.

This was because they were all casted with Minor Demons.

Such a choice was not appropriate for the Riot Mark III.

Minor Demons were too weak to provide a substantial enough performance boost to an expert mech and possibly an ace mech as high-end as this. Only Middle Demons had the power to provide a substantial boost to Riot Mark III in combat.

Ves had prepared an especially wonderful Middle Demon for the Riot Mark III.

He worked together with Helena to produce certain kinds of Middle Demons that were stronger, nastier and possessed their own unique strengths.

It demanded a lot of souls and forced Ves to create more Demon Mixers. He had not even had time to use his vastly improved understanding of demonology to create more efficient vessels for demonic cultivation.

Nonetheless, the haphazard attempts to 'breed' a Middle Demon that was particularly suited to augment the performance of the Riot Mark III had succeeded.

Ves could not wait to Demoncast the Riot Mark III and observe first-hand how the traits of the Middle Demon altered the physical properties of the mech frame!

Days passed by.

The work still proceeded according to schedule.

Neither Ves nor Gloriana took any breaks that lasted for longer than a quarter of an hour.

While Gloriana still needed to take time off to fill her belly or visit the lady's room, Ves had turned into a perpetual motion engine as his superior phase lord physique allowed him to keep going without interruption.

While his mental and spiritual fatigue was building up a lot faster, Ves could easily bear the mounting pressure for the time being.

Even the pain of his injured true body only served to sharpen his focus and temper his endurance.

He devoted much of his work in the first three days on fabricating the armor plating and outer layers of the Riot Mark III.

The latest iteration of the Chaos Armor had grown far beyond its initial specifications. The combination of armor-grade superdimensional alloy, archetech, hyper technology and E-technology resulted in an unholy amalgamation of ultra-modern technology and bizarre wizardly.

Gloriana hated it. She hated the name. She hated the very concept of what Ves was trying to accomplish with it. Her hatred in the inconsistent nature of this armor system could not be described with words.

It was no surprise then that she foisted all of the assignments related to fabricating it to Ves.

Just as well.

This was a logical division of work.

Gloriana possessed a much better understanding of archetech and was much more suited to fabricate the much more technologically complex internal archetech components.

Ves did not master archetech to the same extent, but possessed a way of working with superdimensional technology that was unsurpassed due to his phase lord capabilities.

The armor system also involved the least complications when it came to archetech, so Ves was able to complete his assignments without needing to borrow his wife's assistance.

In fact, she had already pre-written a whole document of detailed instructions and answers for him. This made it even less likely that he would have to interrupt her work in order to get her to fix his mistakes.

Working on the Chaos Armor was a cathartic experience to Ves. He could forget all of his worries and hyperfixate on producing the armor of his dreams.

Ves as well as Vulcan obsessed over every armor plate. They studied the wonder of combining different techs and materials into a single piece of superdimensional archemetal that was hard beyond measure.

The superdimensional archemetal looked even more impressive when Ves used his phase lord senses.

He was not only able to observe the matter that was hidden in the higher dimensions, but he could also use his powers to shape and manipulate it so that they could provide even more relevant benefits!

Ves knew that he was just scratching the surface of what he was able to do. He needed to dedicate more time to experimenting to expand what he could do in this aspect.

It might not be necessary for him to figure out how to do this by hand. He knew for a fact that the Red Association and other major powers were working on developing their own means of unlocking the vast potential of superdimensional matter.

It would probably take a year or so for the RA to complete the development of the first proper superdimensional production machine that could fully reach into the higher dimensions.

Not just Ves, but anyone could do the same kind of stuff, thereby allowing red humanity to catch up to the native aliens when it came to processing superdimensional matter!

He looked forward to this development. Superdimensional matter would continue to rise in value as people got more use out of it. The Larkinsons would continue to earn a huge amount of profit and derive much more powerful applications from their own stock.

Of even greater importance was the potential for superdimensional matter to be a game changer in red humanity's future confrontation with the natives of the Messier 87.

Ves still carried the brand of the Subjugation King.

Unlike the so-called 'kings' of the Ur-Titan Phalanx, this supremely powerful alien was much more deserving of this title!

Unless a god pilot was able to achieve an unheard-of breakthrough to the fourth major cultivation rank in the next 5 decades, red humanity could only look for other solutions to make up for the immense gap in power.

Red humanity needed more god pilots.

The greater the numbers, the greater the chance that they could defeat the alien God King when he arrived!

Combined with full superdimensional god mechs, these powerhouses might just be able to repel the extragalactic enemy and buy more time for their civilization!

However, red humanity was still far from reaching this state of readiness.

Ves had experienced a fraction of the Subjugation King's first-hand during the ascension of the Dominion of Man.

He could never forget that harrowing experience.

Ves believed that he and many others needed to make many more advanced in superdimensional technology and other fields in order to save the Red Ocean from total subjugation!

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Chapter 7223 The Coming of Chaos

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The components of the Riot Mark III gradually accumulated.

Both the external parts and the internal parts consisted of superdimensional archemetal pieces that would form a near-solid mass once they were pieced together. Their true density was incredible, yet their actual mass in the material dimensions was not too high due to the fact that portions of their matter existed in the other dimensions.

The superdimensionality ratio of these archemetal pieces was not that high compared to raw superdimensional matter.

The blending of other high-grade exotics and hypers diluted the superdimensional matter.

The former was not exactly taking away any matter from the higher dimensions, but they occupied valuable space that could have been used to increase the proportion of superdimensional matter.

This was the inherent shortcoming of the alloy formulas attained by Gloriana. She wished she could increase the superdimensionality ratio.

The higher the ratio, the tougher and more resilient the resulting product!

However, this was an R&D project of such immense difficulty that it could only be done by the research departments of the major powers.

The Larkinsons could barely get started on it with their own homegrown institutions due to their stockpiles of superdimensional matter, but their research efficiency was not particularly high.

Ves inwardly shook his head. Considering his high status within the Red Collective, he no longer had to rely on the Larkinson Clan's own research endeavors to obtain the good stuff. Once he became a tier 2 galactic citizen, all sorts of trading opportunities would open up to him. As long as he was willing to exchange chips, it was not impossible to get his hands on more advanced alloy formulas, especially in the future.

In any case, the superdimensionality ratio of the Riot Mark III was not particularly high, but it was not too low either.

The reason why this was the case was due to the use of armor-grade superdimensional matter.

Although it was inferior to weapon-grade superdimensional matter, the armor-grade stuff was still good enough to carry the label of high-grade.

Only a modest amount of armor-grade matter already shifted a large amount of mass into the higher dimension!

The Superdimensional Chaos Armor therefore turned into a robust superdimensional archemetal armor system that not only offered an incredible amount of protection, but was also integrated with simple components that increased the Riot Mark III's ability to preserve his performance under fire!

In order to enhance the defenses even further, the Chaos Armor could be energized to boost its damage resistance against most forms of attack. This imposed a greater load on the power reactor, but it was well worth the price considering that the expert mech did not make use of energy weapons.

All of this only amounted to the most obvious technical features of the Superdimensional Chaos Armor.

As much as Ves became infected by the hype of superdimensional technology, he did not forget about the metaphysical properties of the armor.

"It is too bad that Jovy is not here to see his work come to fruition." He sighed.

His wife frowned. "He could have at least warned us before he left."

Jovy's unexpected absence from the Bluejay Fleet was another reason why she was upset at the continuous delays.

If they fabricated the Riot Mark III sooner, then they may have been able to work alongside RA liaison in this workshop.

Strictly speaking, his presence was not essential. Jovy worked as a contributor who lent his design philosophy as well as other pieces of knowledge to imbue the Chaos Armor with the ability to defy reality in a special manner.

"The Red Association issued a high priority recall order to him." Ves mentioned. "The mechers do not do this casually. It most certainly means a bigshot has personally summoned him for an important purpose. My guess is that a Master Mech Designer or other important official wanted to question Jovy about myself now that I am on track to become a tier 2 galactic citizen. He knows me a lot better than people who have only been able to observe me at a distance. We worked on the same mech design project and have compared our design philosophies to each other. He is my friend, and that means that he can offer insights that others simply cannot."

"Are you not worried that he will divulge information that you would rather want to remain buried?" His wife asked with a measure of concern.

Ves shrugged. "Even if I do, what difference does that make? I am very clear that Jovy owes his loyalty to the Red Association. He has an obligation to be truthful when questioned by his fellow mechers. I will not ask him to betray his oath and turn against his own organization for selfish reasons. Besides, I am no longer the small third-class or second-class mech designer from the past. I am a tier 2 galactic citizen. Do you know what that means? It means that the established institutions of red humanity work for me instead of the other way around. So long as my secrets do not fundamentally threaten our civilization, they will be happy to sweep inconvenient facts under the rug."

The more time Ves spent among the upper echelon of human society, the more he understood how he should play the game.

The bigger picture mattered more than the smaller details. The more important you became, the more you could get away with... minor transgressions.

In fact, it was not impossible to get away with greater transgressions so long as you had the strength to deter retribution. This was how the Polymath brazenly got away with claiming Bridgehead One.

"Do you think that Jovy will return after he has concluded his report?"

"I expect him to." Ves said. "He will likely have orders to stay in touch with me and work together with us more frequently. In order to be of greater service to us, he is likely being taught a bunch of cutting-edge knowledge that will be very helpful in our future mech design projects. It is what I would do if I was in their place. Jovy is my strongest connection to the RA."

Now that Ves became increasingly more invested in the Red Collective, the mechers wanted to make sure that he would not forget his old buddies. There was great value in maintaining the friendship and support of the department head of the Phase Lord Department..

Though Ves certainly missed Jovy's input, he already understood just enough about the RA mech designer's design philosophy to be able to fabricate the Chaos Armor components without any apparent issue.

Jovy's touch had already spread across the mech design. So long as Ves kept this in mind, the resulting superdimensional archetech components gained a touch of chaos and instability that could not be explained.

This already became evident when he put the finished parts under a scanner. The sophisticated device was not able to maintain as much accuracy as before.

The data grew fuzzy as if the scanners became affected by a constant low-level interference field.

Ves knew that this was only the beginning. The completed expert mech would be able to produce much more disruptions at a metaphysical level!

The ultimate goal of the Superdimensional Chaos Armor was to ruin the enemy's plan.

So long as the Riot Mark III was lucky, he could deflect attacks that should have normally penetrated his resilient armor system.

The quantum confusion produced by the Chaos Armor also transformed the Riot Mark III into an unpredictable object.

Jovy had gone all-out in reversing his normal work method when contributing to the mech design.

Instead of trying to bend random probabilities in his favor, he instead chose to embrace the chaos and deliberately maximized the chaos factor with every trick he could leverage.

As long as this experimental treatment worked, then the Riot Mark III would become the bane of all future seers!

The Red Collective's prophets would probably hate the Riot Mark III to the bone, because the latter's ability to completely muck up future predictions due to his probabilistic overload activity did not distinguish between friends and enemies!

Although there was no apparent sign that the enemy made use of prophets or the like, it was always possible for this to change.

The secrets of qi cultivation were not exclusive to red humanity. The aliens had just as much access to E energy radiation. It was natural for them to invest a lot of time, manpower and resources into figuring out how to harness this free and abundant source of cosmic energy.

The Riot Mark III therefore served as a vital safeguard against enemies who tried to predict Ves' movements and actions going forward. Ves even thought about assigning the Riot Mark III to the Bluejay Fleet as opposed to the Premier Fleet so that he would continually benefit from the new machine's ability to muck up prophecies.

Ves did not mind it if he cut off his own access to reliable predictions of the future. The Moloch Squadron would probably hate him for this, but he personally never trusted prophets and their visions of potential futures.

He himself managed to realize low-probability outcomes many times due to resorting to unexpected trump cards.

He was not arrogant enough to assume that his enemies had no way to replicate such feats.

With the new Riot Mark III by his side, Ves would at least be assured that neither side could make use of prophets or make effective predictions through other means.

Of course, Venerable Rosa Orfan would pay a hefty price for this benefit. She would have to pilot a mech that was not only hostile, but could never be fully tamed.

The First Sword Mark III and the Riot Mark III existed on opposite spectrums in this regard.

The former was a meticulously engineered ace swordsman mech that was designed to give full play to Saint Dise's exquisite swordsmanship.

Her sword style and sword techniques were based on controlled aggression. She relied on both ferocity and precision to launch effective attacks that targeted the enemy's weaknesses while avoiding their strengths.

The chaotic elements embraced by the Riot Mark III were therefore completely anathema to the First Sword Mark III.

The lack of control and the reduced reliability of the Superdimensional Chaos Armor and other chaotic factors would mess up Saint Dise's execution and could cause her weapon to wobble and sway out of her control!

This was why Ves never thought about implementing the same solution to the First Sword Mark III or other high-end mechs for that matter.

The Superdimensional Chaos Armor and all of the complications it brought along was destined to become the exclusive feature of the Riot Mark III.

Its properties would elevate the expert spearman mech from a rather typical example of his mech archetype into a unique existence that transcended his archetype.

What Ves looked forward to even more was how the Superdimensional Chaos Armor would mutate once he finally Demoncasted the upgraded mech.

"Only a few more days." He whispered.

First, he needed to complete the other steps of the fabrication run.

Now that Ves and Gloriana completed all of the parts with the assistance of Alexis Streon, they proceeded to move on to the upgrade process.

This was a very difficult endeavor.

The Riot Mark II had never been fully repaired, so he was much more prone to breaking than usual.

The tech bases of the Mark II and the Mark III were also completely different.

It became a lot more challenging to keep the original living mech alive when the parts of the Mark III were unable to slot into the parts of the Mark II!

In order to work through this messy situation, Gloriana had already fabricated temporary 'bridges' that could serve as temporary interfaces between old and new. They were crude and only barely did the job, but they should be enough to solve this troublesome issue.

"Let us begin the assembly process." She announced.

Chapter 7224: Monster in the Making

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The assembly process proceeded with considerable difficulty.

As much as Gloriana used the extra time afforded to her to plan out this phase of the fabrication run, she could not foresee everything.

The only saving grace was that she knew that things would definitely not go right, so she put a lot of time between the steps to account for additional delays.

There were three major reasons why Ves and Gloriana encountered the most difficult fabrication process of their careers so far.

The damaged state of the Riot Mark II forced the mech designers to work with greater care and attention.

Alexa no longer directly took part in the assembly work, but instead hovered around the reshape machine in order to act as a monitor and supervisor.

She inspected the ongoing work with meticulous care and flagged any parts and sections that threatened to cause problems if left unattended.

Another reason why the Riot Mark III put up so many difficulties was the interference produced by the Superdimensional Chaos Armor and other sources of instability.

While the Miracle Couple anticipated these problems and tried to save the assembly of the armor system for last, Jovy's design philosophy was not confined to the exterior.

Even the internal components carried a touch of probabilistic chaos!

All of this meant that the more new components started to get attached to the mech frame, the greater the chance of accidents.

This was not a big deal for the new archemetal components. Most of them were incredibly tough and resilient. They could easily withstand simple hits and falls.

The problem was that the old parts were much less able to withstand serious accidents. There were times when Ves and Gloriana feared that the mech frame would collapse in the middle of its transformation because the old and damaged mech frame could not bear all of the pressure!

The third complication was the inclusion of the Carmine System. This required the mech designers to open up the deepest parts of the internal structure and insert mechanical as well as biomechanical parts that possessed completely different properties than the surrounding archetech!

Of course, the Carmine System that Ves made use of this time was not a normal version. He had applied several improvements to it in order to increase its damage resistance and add a few extra safeguards.

While the installation of the Carmine System was already difficult enough, doing it while the incomplete mech frame spontaneously caused accidents made it worse!

It was situations like these that tested a mech designer's comprehensive abilities.

Ves and Gloriana not only had to do their best to anticipate these kinds of accidents and take measures to stop them in advance.

If they failed, they had to respond quickly and improvise solutions on the spot to stabilize the Riot when the living mech was at his most vulnerable!

There was no time to formulate an entire response plan. The two mech designers had to work on the spot to remedy the immediate issue.

Fortunately, the Miracle Couple more than proved their mettle during this phase.

Gloriana possessed a sharp vision for mechanical imperfections and excelled at anticipating problems in advance. She did not hesitate to pause her current assignment in order to move to another section of the mech frame in order to correct any issues that she managed to spot.

Ves on the other hand took on the role of a rescuer. He responded the fastest if the chaotic interplay between new and old parts caused sudden problems.

With Vulcan assisting him from the side, he was able to devise clever solutions in much less time, allowing him to prevent a situation from deteriorating any further.

"The Riot is proving to be an untameable mount." Ves spoke with a hint of tired frustration. "I know it is all deliberate, but it is definitely not fun to deal with these escalating problems. The accident rate is absurdly high."

Gloriana shook her head. “At least you have solid proof that you and Jovy’s vaunted Chaos Armor is working. If the Riot Mark III is already generating so much metaphysical instability when he is still in an uncompleted state, imagine what it would be like when he is finally whole and converted into a D-arm.”

Ves began to frown. “If the finished product is going to be worse, then... I am afraid we need to build a special containment chamber to protect this ship or any other vessel that carries this dangerous machine.”

He genuinely overlooked this issue when it should have been obvious in hindsight.

Perhaps he might be able to cobble up an improvised solution with the spare materials that were left after fabricating the initial components.

That would expend valuable superdimensional matter as well as other high-grade materials that should have been reserved for repairs and fabricating spare parts.

However, it would do nobody any good if the Riot Mark III somehow caused the Tarrasque to drop out of FTL travel or crash due to the misfortune spread by the new machine!

Gloriana turned her head at Ves and nodded. She agreed with the plan he shared through the design network. She agreed that this was probably the best way to address this mounting threat in a hurry.

In the end, the Riot Mark III would probably become a machine that could only be used while taking a large amount of precautions.

Just like the tier 3 Destroyer spear reserved for Venerable Rosa Orfan, her upgraded machine would have to spend a lot of time in an isolating coffin when not in use.

The thought of it kind of made Ves feel as if he was bringing a literal monster to life.

This monster could not be tamed and would not remain in control if Venerable Orfan was not present to suppress her own machine with her willpower.

The more the Riot Mark III took shape, the more he began to doubt the wisdom of transforming him into a D-arm.

The machine was already quite problematic in his soon-to-be-finished state. Ves could not imagine how much more of a nightmare it would become to keep this machine contained once complete.

The Riot Mark III was the first time that Ves felt as if his creation blurred the line between a demon and a mech!

Rather than calling it with a relatively neutral and meaningless term like D-mech, he should instead categorize the finished product as an outright demonic mech!

“Sir.” Venerable Rosa Orfan interrupted his thoughts. “Please continue. Do not water down my battle partner. I know what I am getting into. I want to be challenged. I do not want to pilot an obedient mech. That is too boring and easy for the likes of myself. I have already begun to fall in

love with what you are building. Keep it up and do not be afraid to make my machine stronger and more unruly. I am not a highly skilled technical swordswoman like Venerable Dise. I need to develop my own capital of strength, and I prefer to rely on my guts and the grit of my resisting machine to overcome my own opposition!”

Her willpower flared, causing the design network to become flooded with her conviction!

Ves had no more doubts about his course of action. Even if he predicted that the Riot Mark III would prove to become a significantly greater hazard than normal, it would be worth it so long as Venerable Orfan would transform into a highly effective spoiler on the battlefield!

Since Ves already planned to assign the Riot Mark III to the Bluejay Fleet, he was very eager to enable Rosa Orfan as much as possible.

Ves, Gloriana and Alexa gradually completed the assembly process.

As the new superdimensional archemehc gradually approached his final form, the observers who visited from time to time became increasingly more impressed.

The Voiken siblings in particular could not help but be amazed.

“I can’t even begin to figure out this crazy armor system.” Sara Voiken said, which was strange as she was one of the armor specialists of the Design Department. “Ves and Gloriana are not content to settle with ordinary superdimensional alloy plating. They somehow managed to succeed at incorporating the new materials into archetech, which must have required a large amount of R&D in order to discover a few stable formulas that can minimize the spatial fluctuations of superdimensional matter. Even then, I can’t even begin to explain why this armor system is causing so many accidents. I lack the depth of understanding in hyper technology and E-technology.”

That was one of the downsides of their EdNet training. The virtual academies were extremely comprehensive when it came to teaching their students on how to work with conventional technologies.

The teaching of hyper technology and especially E-technology proved much more challenging as the virtual reality environment was unable to simulate their effects precisely!

Combined with the fact that these were very new fields, it was no surprise that Sara Voiken and the other EdNet graduates had fallen behind when it came to the most recent developments.

“It will be fine, sister.” Dulo tried to encourage her. “Our remedial studies allows us to catch up much of what we have been missing as of late. From the basics of archetech to the metaphysical solutions that we can employ by leveraging E energy radiation, mech design has evolved way past the Age of Mechs. We will be able to take part in Gloriana’s high-end mech design projects eventually. She needs our newly acquired expertise as she cannot design every part of her mechs to perfection when she is by herself. I can’t imagine that so much time has passed that we are mainly answering to Gloriana as opposed to her husband.”

“Those aren’t the only changes that have happened while we were gone.” Sara muttered. “Our patriarch, I mean former patriarch, has changed more drastically. He has become quite an

impressive fighter and phase lord. I cannot even begin to guess how he is able to become such a scary threat when he is still a mech designer.”

His brother could only smirk as a response. “I always thought that Ves was special. This is one of the reasons why I agreed to accept his invitation to join his clan. Even back then, there were already hints of greatness within him. I do not feel any shame for subordinating myself to a mech designer who already climbed high enough to make millions of mech designers jealous of us for getting into his orbit so early. Latecomers simply don’t have a chance to get close to him anymore.”

The pair of siblings continued to watch the Riot Mark III gradually reaching his final state.

“You wished you were there, don’t you?” Sara plainly asked.

Dulo sighed. “Yes. I contributed to the design of the earlier iterations of the Riot, but... this monstrosity has evolved far beyond my initial vision for this expert mech. I can only be glad that the pair of designers still retained enough aspects of the Riot Mark II to move and fight in a similar fashion as before. Venerable Orfan should not have to completely relearn how to pilot her machine once she enters the cockpit.”

“Her first attempt to pilot the Riot Mark III will be crucial. Our former patriarch thought it was a good idea to pair this crazy mech with a Carmine System.” Sara mentioned. “If Venerable Rosa Orfan is not already a high-tier expert pilot with strong willpower, such a design choice would have been enough for the Red Association to punish our former patriarch for driving the mech pilot to her death. In fact, this outcome might still happen. What if the hostile mech is able to overpower the expert pilot’s willpower?”

“Then I hope that those additional safeguards will do their work. I really hate to see the strongest spearman mech of the Larkinson Clan collapse. Venerable Orfan and the Riot both deserve better.” Dulo said.

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Chapter 7225: Worse Than Expected

Chapter 7225: Worse Than Expected

Gloriana had accounted for the possibility that she and her husband would encounter difficulties during the assembly phase of the fabrication run.

What happened now that they were working on upgrading the Riot exceeded her most pessimistic expectations!

The expert mech being overhauled generated a lot of inexplicable accidents. Parts became misaligned. Electrical components randomly turned online and promptly started to produce problems. A few parts even came loose and almost dropped on top of her head!

"This is ridiculous!" She complained! "This has to be Jovy's fault somehow! How is design philosophy so much stronger?!"

"Jovy isn't the only person at 'fault', honey. A large reason why the Riot is causing all of these problems is due to the hyper materials we are using. They not only come from the best high-grade stockpiles that we can access, but their attributes are also unstable by nature. Jovy's work has somehow activated them and made them far more effective than normal. Nobody sane would mix together a bunch of volatile exotics and hypers that are specifically chosen for how many problems they produce. Admittedly, they are generating activity way beyond what we have measured in my tests. I think that there are other factors in play that are further amplifying their dangerous traits."

His wife frowned. She did not like it when events did not proceed according to plan. The excessive accident rate had already surpassed safe levels. According to standard workshop practice, they should have suspended their work a long time ago. The longer they persisted, the more they subjected themselves and their work to danger!

However, neither Ves nor Gloriana had any intentions of stopping their work. Not when they only needed to complete the final steps before they could finish the physical mech frame.

"Wait. Ves, you were responsible for testing the safety of the combined materials when it came to generating unstable metaphysical activity. When did you conduct these tests?"

"More than a month ago..."

"That was when we had yet to obtain superdimensional alloy formulas that are compatible with archetech." Gloriana said. "Now that we have obtained them, we successfully combined both superdimensional technology with archetech, thereby producing a drastically different result. What we may have overlooked is how these high-end techs may have produced a much greater change in the expression of hyper technology and E-technology than we initially thought!"

Ves widened his eyes! She was right!

"Damn! I should have thought of that! In fact, the proportion of volatile high-grade materials used in this iteration of the Riot Mark III is higher because I only took superdimensional technology into account. Now that we are combining it with archetech, the proportion of volatile materials is higher, thereby generating more unstable physical and metaphysical activity. However, it shouldn't have been so bad! I'm not stupid, you know. I conducted extensive tests and experimented with constructs with substantially greater proportions of volatile materials. The current ratios should be well below the maximum safe threshold!"

Gloriana grimaced. "You are correct, but your results only apply to regular superdimensional mechs. It is clear that the rules are different when it comes to a superdimensional archetech. My current theory is that the high density and very low proximity of the mixed volatile materials is generating a level of harmful activity that surpasses our flawed assumptions."

In other words, it was not just about quantity.

The Riot Mark III had turned into a serious hazard because all of the dangerous materials were crammed together into smaller places!

This was the root cause why the Riot Mark III's accident rate had gotten out of hand.

"This problem will not last." Ves said. "The structure of his machine is so strong and robust that once we have swapped out the remaining delicate parts, everything that is left should be able to withstand this degree of instability. At most, the Riot Mark III will suffer more frequent accidents in the future that necessitate further repairs and more frequent maintenance cycles."

"Then it will be good to keep the Riot Mark III close to us in the Bluejay Fleet. It is irresponsible to transfer him to the Premier Fleet when there are no mech designers or mech technicians over there who are qualified to work on the advanced technologies that we have combined within this volatile mech frame." His wife concluded.

The pair began to rack their brains on how to complete the final steps without botching the entire process.

Ves suddenly came up with an idea. He immediately turned to Venerable Orfan.

"Come closer and press your hand against the exterior of your new mech. Try to commune with your living mech and ask him to keep everything under control. Your willpower and your battle partner's determination should be able to produce a noticeable effect. It may be enough to complete the Riot Mark III without suffering a major accident that could force us to suspend our work."

The expert pilot was more than willing to help. She had grown a little tired after staying awake for so many days, but her willpower along with injecting herself with stimulates still kept her sharp.

"I won't be able to form a serious connection with my Riot without piloting him, but I will try my best." She promised.

"Good. You only need to keep it up until we have put the final pieces together. We believe that the Riot Mark III does not harbor any hostile intentions... for now at least. He should be eager to suppress his accidents, but he can do a better job if you leverage your willpower. Forget about the interface. A Blood Pact can work without relying on data channels. Maybe you can accomplish a lesser feat that can still make a difference. This will be good practice for your upcoming attempt to form a pact with your transformed D-mech."

The expert pilot did as instructed. She touched her reinvented battle partner and tried to commune with him with her willpower.

Despite the lacking instructions, the Riot still possessed a connection to his roots and remembered his battle partner's force of will.

"I can feel the difference." Gloriana said as she couldn't help but sigh in relief. "The Riot... is partially calming down. I have much more confidence that we can complete the mech frame without any major incidents."

"Good. Stay on your guard, though. Let us not rely too much on our assumptions."

Ves was able to experience the difference more clearly. The monster of a superdimensional archemehch still possessed the ferocity of an untamed exobeast, but Venerable Orfan enabled the living mech to remember his original purpose and his dedication to his battle partner.

"He's changed." She said. "Is this even supposed to happen? None of the other mechs that you have upgraded has become any different as far as I know. The Dark Zephyr is still the same speed junky as before, and the Minerva still exudes the same kind of authority as before, but stronger."

"That is because those upgrades are less extreme." Ves replied to the expert pilot. "What we have done is a very radical transformation. What is even more important is that we have implemented a much more drastic conceptual change. The Riot Mark III fully embraces his nature as a proliferator of chaos. We couldn't do this in the past because we lacked the right conditions. This is not the case anymore. It is not just the new technologies that are making a difference. My capabilities as a mech designer have also grown. I fear... that one of the reasons why this mech has become so much more dangerous is due to an unforeseen synergy."

"What synergy?"

"I seem to have acquired a talent for making mechs based on negative attributes more dangerous."

Ves was not quite sure about that. He intended to investigate this further when he had the time to do so. For now, he could only cope with the current situation and complete the current machine.

After a brief delay, Ves and Gloriana completed the final steps with Alexa constantly monitoring the entire mech frame for any impending hazards.

Meanwhile, Venerable Rosa Orfan exercised her extraordinary willpower outside of the cockpit for the sole purpose of keeping her machine in check.

No major incidents occurred.

The mech frame finally reached a nominally complete state.

As everyone withdrew, they continued to observe the Riot Mark III for a time, as if they were afraid that the machine couldn't possibly be so quiet.

"I still feel that the Riot Mark III is... off." Gloriana mentioned.

"I agree." Alexa said. "I feel like I am staring at a dark forest. I do not feel safe if I move any closer."

It was remarkable that the Riot Mark III was able to make them feel threatened when he had yet to convert into a D-mech.

That meant that the final transformation would produce a much more drastic result than expected.

Ves turned to the expert pilot.

"Rosa."

"What is it, Ves?"

"While I am pretty sure I know your answer already, we still have to do our due diligence and inform you of the risks. Due to various known and unknown reasons, the Riot Mark III up to this point has deviated beyond our expectations. You have observed the reformation of the Riot with your own eyes, so you should roughly have an impression of how much more of a threat he has become."

Venerable Orfan slowly nodded. "I am not blind."

"In light of this unexpected development, we are presenting you with two choices. First, if you are happy with the current state of your expert mech, then we can stop the fabrication run right here. I can assure you that the Riot Mark III in her current state is functionally complete and perfectly usable. He is already much stronger and more effective than the Dark Zephyr Mark III. In fact, my wife and I are pretty sure that he has become the strongest junior ace mech currently in existence, even surpassing the First Sword Mark III in many aspects."

While all of this sounded nice, the expert pilot knew that there was still a final step.

"The second choice you can make is to let us transform your Riot Mark III into an experimental and completely unprecedented D-mech." Ves continued to explained. "I have explained what this entails to you before, so I won't repeat all of that basic information. What is different is that the base mech is already several times more dangerous than we assumed. A process that produces a D-mech will always turn anything bad into worse. If you think the Riot Mark III in his current form is already bad, the resulting D-mech will become a nightmare to pilot in your current state."

"Piloting the Riot Mark III as an expert pilot will be a matter of life and death." Gloriana voiced her prediction. "Expert pilots have fairly strong willpower, but we fear that you are not able to cope with the Riot Mark III after he has undergone his final transformation according to our original plan. Ves originally thought the expert mech wouldn't be as bad as he is now, so he has tried to overcompensate and make the last step extra dramatic. Now, I fear that his preparations for the final step are too excessive. The mech will truly kill you if you cannot tame him on your first attempt. This is especially the case considering we are talking about a Carmine System that will most definitely undergo unknown and potentially dangerous mutations."

"...Good."

"Pardon?"

Venerable Orfan grinned and laughed! "Hahahaha! This is perfect! This is exactly what I want! I already told you that you should hold nothing back! I do not want to stay behind anymore. Only the meanest and most difficult mechs can stimulate my breakthrough! If I fail, then I deserve to die. Only by cutting off my retreat route will I be able to dedicate everything I have to smashing through my bottleneck! Do it! Give me a D-mech that leaves me no other choice but to advance to an ace pilot in order to survive! I am confident that I can get my act together this time! My willpower will become strong enough to tame this unruly beast!"

Her fighting intent shot through the roof!

Now that the decisive moment had come, she did not shirk away from the fatal risks, but embraced them as if they were her lifeline!

Chapter 7226: Final Doubts

Chapter 7226: Final Doubts

The critical moment had come.

The Riot Mark III in his current state had reached a completed state, but that did not necessarily mean he had reached his final form.

At this moment, the mech largely matched the design. There was nothing wrong with stopping at this junction, though if Ves truly wanted to make the two converge, he and his wife would have to make subsequent modifications and corrections to reduce the sources of instability.

As it was, the Riot Mark III was far too wild and unrestrained to function as a normal high-tier expert mech.

All of the mech designers in the workshop compartment could feel it. From Ves whose spiritual sensitivity was the highest to the EdNet returnees who were overlooking the fabrication run on a catwalk installed on the opposite side, each of them felt as if they were in the presence of a predator that possessed undisguised hostile intentions.

This was not a mech.

This was a monster clothed in the resilient skin of a mech.

Ves never intended to make the Riot Mark III so ferocious at this stage. This was the first time he began to fear his own abilities.

Would subsequent mechs turned out as malevolent as this? He certainly hoped not. He still clung to the explanation that the main reason why the Riot Mark III turned out this way was because of unexpected synergies between multiple different techs and negative properties.

So long as Ves paid more attention to this detail and conducted more detailed tests in the future, he could avoid or even better control the manifestation of this phenomenon.

That did not help him much at this time. Venerable Rosa Orfan had been hyping herself up for multiple months now. Her patience had come to an end. Having witnessed other pilots such as Saint Tusa and Saint Dise earning glory on the frontlines of the Red War, Rosa Orfan wanted in on the action.

Staying as an expert pilot was no longer enough for her anymore. In the war against the native aliens, the only mech pilots that possessed the barest amount of agency in the field were saints.

Only ace pilots possessed the power to destroy enemy warships with impunity and present a proper challenge against enemy phase lords.

A full superdimensional ace mech was even more of a deadly killer. Such a machine could easily pierce through the ubiquitous spatial barriers that protected phase lords and directly target the weak points of the big and clumsy aliens.

Of course, superdimensional arms race was not one-sided. The Red Cabal kept pumping out more Saint Piercers and Saint Armors as if the alien phase whales finally decided that weaponizing the 'bones' of the so-called Elder Gods was a righteous cause.

The alien-grade weapons and raiments turned enemy phase lords into killers of human champions.

Any ace mech that lacked superdimensional armor had to fight an uphill battle to say the least.

The Riot Mark III was therefore close to the ideal instrument of war to Venerable Orfan. Ves and Gloriana had already explained that he was pretty much a first-class ace mech that had been temporarily downgraded to a first-class expert mech.

This was because the pair had preserved the old resonating materials from the Mark II.

Venerable Orfan was intimately familiar with the use of BSN-17A and Pierrotis. She had mastered the corresponding resonating abilities and had squeezed out all of the potential that they could produce.

She was eager to move on to greater pastures. Ace mech-grade resonating materials possessed much more dramatic features that could transform the way she fought and give her a distinct edge in combat, especially against challenging opponents.

One of the most impressive manifestations of this among the works of Ves and Gloriana was the latest iteration of the Dark Zephyr.

The Banisher Edition gained a completely new ability that allowed the light skirmisher to briefly banish objects into another dimension.

Though it was initially hard for Saint Tusa to effectively utilize this resonating ability at his relatively low resonance strength, he became more and more comfortable in using it in battle.

His resonance strength grew, allowing him to expend less effort to banish larger objects or cut off chunks from more resilient enemies.

Saint Tusa developed creative ways to take advantage of this banishing ability.

For example, he could temporarily banish heavy ordnance such as a large plasma bomb, race towards an enemy battleship before bringing the payload back into realspace, where it would subsequently detonate and destroy a massive hull that would have taken a fair amount of time for an ace light skirmisher to destroy!

Another trick that Tusa figured out was to banish lots of boarding troops and deliver them directly inside the hull of an enemy warship!

This could not only be done a lot faster than through conventional boarding methods, but it was also safer as there was no way for the enemy to intercept the boarding vehicles in advance.

The surprise factor alone often played a decisive role in the quick capture of enemy vessels!

Of course, the main target of his resonating ability were enemy phase lords.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III was able to mess up small groups of lesser phase lords by banishing them at random times. Their sudden disappearances often unbalanced their peers and caused their flawed teamwork to deteriorate even further.

Greater phase lords were trickier. Their bodies were too large to banish entirely, but the Dark Zephyr Mark III could still banish their weapons and other equipment for a short time.

Even if their arms returned back to realspace a minute or so later, all of the maneuvering in space caused them to drift far away from their owners, causing the greater phase lords to remain weaponless for an even longer period of time!

Only greater phase lords equipped with superdimensional equipment had the ability to stump the Dark Zephyr Mark III.

Saint Piercer arms resisted banishment extremely well and presented a fatal threat against the expert light skirmisher.

Saint Armors that provided full coverage were virtually invincible. The tier 3 Destroyer spear was stronger than most weapons, but its penetration power was ultimately not good enough.

This was one of the reasons why Saint Tusa gladly sent back the tier 3 Destroyer spear. Swordmaster Ketis had already forged a pair of exquisite masterwork superdimensional knives that allowed the Dark Zephyr to return to his old fighting style.

While the pair of superdimensional knives possessed inferior reach, their penetration power was unmatched, and that mattered the most.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III was ultimately not designed to wield Destroyer weapons. The light skirmisher did not possess any notable support systems or synergies that could bring out the most of the Destroyer spear.

The case should be different for the Riot Mark III. Even if the tier 3 Destroyer spear had yet to receive a superdimensional upgrade, the new spearman mech should be able to stimulate the Destroyer particles of the dangerous weapon to a considerably greater degree than other machines!

Ves even came up with an unverified theory.

The meaner the expert mech, the deadlier the Destroyer weapon.

Though he had no solid proof that this was the case, it conformed to his theoretical framework.

This was one of the many reasons why he was looking forward to turning the Riot Mark III into a D-mech.

To be honest, he truly did not want to stop this ultimate step despite the many dangers associated with this crazy project.

His logic told him that he had long exceeded the safety threshold and that he should stop before his work could endanger his client.

His heart was completely fired up at this time! His emotions burned with curiosity. He could not bring himself to abide by the rules of safety and stop when he was on the cusp of creating an unprecedentedly powerful machine!

Gloriana looked at him and shook her head. She knew exactly what kind of mood had overtaken Ves. While she was not as enthused about pressing forward after encountering so many unexpected deviations, she knew her husband well enough that no amount of argumentation would sway him from creating a truly new work.

"Gloriana, give the order."

She looked at Ves for a few more seconds before she turned around and issued an expulsion order.

"EVERYONE OUT!"

There was no need for her to say anything further. She had already informed everyone of the rules beforehand.

All of the idle mech designers, assistants, bodyguards and so on promptly departed from the private workshop.

That left only 4 individuals.

"Meow."

Lucky had already been recalled a day ago. He was responsible for sniffing out and disabling every bug, sensor, listening device and etcetera.

Alexa Streon meanwhile had been tasked with completely disabling and depowering the production machines. Who knew what kind of data they might gather.

While Ves had no illusions that these measures would stop the Red Association from monitoring what was taking place inside a workshop compartment inside one of its own warships, it should at least create enough ambiguity.

That was enough as far as he was concerned.

Ves turned to Alexa.

"For safety's sake, you should move further backwards." He told her. "What will happen next will happen quickly and without warning. I cannot guarantee how the Riot Mark III will turn out, but it will definitely become a lot stronger and possibly more dangerous than before. It may even gain enough autonomy to start lashing out at everything."

Alexa frowned when she heard this. "Is it safe to conduct your secret procedure in this workshop, then?"

"Don't worry. The energy cells of the mech are nearly completely empty. The machine only has enough power to run basic systems. Even if the Riot is able to go wild for a time, he won't be able to do so for long. This workshop already contains very powerful internal defense systems. We spent the extra time to produce additional superdimensional restraints. If it is necessary, I will bring out the Dark Apostle and have him subdue the machine. If that is still not enough, we can activate the emergency ejection command that will void the entire workshop into space. I specifically cleared this matter up with Admiral Tensen. This is an expensive measure, but it is the best way to prevent further damage to the warship."

Now that the Bluejay Fleet was in transit, there were few good locations to complete this final step in a hurry. Ves just decided to do it here and hope that they could keep everything under control.

He wanted to avoid bringing the Riot Mark III out in the open before he was ready for his debut.

What if the Demoncasting process caused the Riot Mark III to transform into a horribly mutated biomechanical monstrosity that looked nothing like a proper mech?!

If recordings of this abomination spread out, Ves would definitely incur a lot of criticism from the mech community!

Of course, all of these were merely backup measures. Ves already intended to keep the Riot Mark III in the System Space.

So long as the machine could remain contained within the System Space, Ves should have enough time to deal with a recalcitrant machine.

Ves had good reasons to expect trouble.

The Middle Demon that he prepared for the Riot was not taken from a random soul that had been mutated into a demon.

Instead, he broke open one of Lucky's gems, took out the demon that was stored inside before subsequently strengthening it through successive means by feeding it with other demons, both Minor and Middle ones!

[Doom of Remis]

The negative energy of a failed prophet is gathered by this gem. Increases the failure rate of all surrounding enemies by 25 percent.

The demon contained within this ominous gem was the perfect choice for the Riot. Yet now that it had come to this, Ves began to doubt whether this remained the case.

Chapter 7227: Prophet's Bane

Chapter 7227: Prophet's Bane

Ves and Gloriana gathered at the Workshop of Creation.

They had already imported the Riot Mark III and brought the newly upgraded expert mech over at the Demoncasting Forge.

The Riot Mark III already looked as if he fit into this location. The evil and demonic atmosphere of the forge complemented the machine's chaotic demeanor.

This was the site where the Riot Mark III would transform into a D-mech.

Nobody knew exactly what this meant. Not even Ves who pushed for this in the first place had any way to accurately predict the outcome of this final step.

He could only extrapolate the possible outcomes based on the data and observations gathered from D-arms that he already produced.

Weapons such as the Bitter Scimitar, the Murder Knife as well as the temporary D-arms that the Dark Apostle expended during the leadership challenge provided a lot of helpful clues.

However, Demoncasting a mech-scale weapon was different from doing the same to a complete living mech.

Not even the extensive course in demonology that he acquired from a recent enlightenment fruit had all of the answers.

Demonic Possession Spearmanship mainly taught him how to wield the power of demons in combat.

It did not go into too much detail on how to impart the power of demons into objects.

This meant that Ves could only make vague and unreliable predictions about the outcome.

Though Ves still harbored doubts about his current course, they hadn't grown severe enough to persuade him to stop his current trajectory.

One way or another, he needed to see this experiment through. He was willing to sacrifice the Riot Mark III and possibly Venerable Rosa Orfan in order to gamble for the ultimate outcome.

Whether the mech would ascend to a higher level or degenerate into a machine of ill repute hinged on the results of the Demoncasting process.

"Here we are, Ves." Gloriana solemnly said. "I have done my best to set up the Riot Mark III for this transformation. What happens from here on out is your responsibility. If your actions lead to the complete ruination of an expert mech that I have painstakingly tried to improve over the course of several months..."

She would definitely become pissed. No mech designer wanted to let so much time and effort go to waste, least of all Gloriana who considered each of her personal works to be her legacy and the living proof of her design philosophy!

Ves tried to reassure her. “I am ready for this. Compared to my first attempts at Demoncasting, my understanding of the rules and underlying theories has advanced considerably. I was already able to apply much of my gains to the weapons used in the most recent leadership challenge. Those D-arms were quite powerful despite being infused by Minor Demons.”

“This is different, Ves. A Middle Demon is not comparable to a Minor Demon in strength. You also fed your so-called Prophet’s Bane with additional Middle Demons to make it even stronger! The outcome of this attempt will be completely different from the last ones. There is not much equivalency between the two. We need to be ready to respond to the worst possible outcomes.”

“Don’t worry. I think this Demoncasting Forge has excellent protective measures against hostile machines. This place is quite comprehensive. I do not believe that it has neglected the need for safety.”

“You do not know that.” Gthatloriana accused. “We do not know how this facility works. We do not know the meaning of these runes. I will not make the assumption that the Mech Designer System will save us from our own mistakes. If your D-mechs loses control and begins to rampage without restraint, then I better hope you have the means to put down your mistake.”

Ves briefly grimaced. “I do not like to think about it, but I haven’t neglected these issues. I have prepared enough measures. Enough waiting. I am eager to complete the final step. Let’s retrieve the Middle Demon in question.”

They entered a cave that contained the mysterious Demon Prison. This was an upgradeable facility that was safely able to store any demon, even the more powerful ones such as its sole occupant.

The Demon Prison did a good job of restraining and isolating the captive demons, thereby preventing them from spreading their malevolent forces outwards.

The biggest downside was that it only offered 5 cells, which was way too few as far as Ves was concerned. He needed dozens of them to conduct repeat experiments and discover the connection between different demons and their effects on a Demoncasted object.

Unfortunately, he had no time to waste on such experiments. The current project came first.

The Demon Prison also possessed secure channels that led to the Demon Summoning Circle and the Demoncasting Forge. This allowed for the transfer of captive demons without giving them any opportunity to escape and destroy everything in their reach.

“Prophet’s Bane.” Ves whispered the name that he bestowed on this demon.

There was nothing much to say about his appearance. When he carefully broke upon the Doom of Remis gem, he became swept by the strong aura of malaise and disaster around the ancient remnant entity.

Ves immediately began to get assaulted by illusions of vague disasters in the past, from seeing Yernstall getting devoured by the mutated voribugs to the Red Cabal activating a galactic doomsday weapon that tore the Red Ocean in half!

All of these glimpses lasted too short for him to gather too many details, and their accuracy was low.

Who knew how many lies and falsehoods the Middle Demon had sneaked into these visions.

Though weak and in a highly starved state, Ves had stuffed the Middle Demon into the Demon Prison as soon as possible.

The only times he took out the Middle Demon from his cell was when he stuffed him into an improved and much more durable Demon Mixer.

The Prophet's Bane shared the same space with other Middle Demons, each of which had been produced from scores of Minor Demons and who knew how many regular souls.

By improving the design of the Demon Mixer and constantly tinkering with the ratios, Ves gradually managed to figure out how to produce a relatively weak Middle Demon with less 'ingredients'.

There should still be a lot of room for improvement. His recently gained understanding in demonology gave him a lot more theory and clues on how to further refine the design of his demonic gu containers.

The next iterations of his Demon Mixers should be a lot more efficient!

In any case, Ves had carefully tried to feed and strengthen the Prophet's Bane through several rounds of gu cultivation in order to make it stronger.

This had been a risky venture. He risked the loss of this unique demon who possessed a rare aura of doom and misfortune if it ended up losing the brutal competition for survival.

After all, the other Middle Demons were all ruthless figures who had won their own battle royales. They had devoured all of their competitors and successfully advanced to their current ranks, if only barely.

Ves specifically selected them out of others due to possessing traits that may be complementary to the Prophet's Bane.

His goal was to strengthen the Bane's core attributes by feeding it with Middle Demons that showed signs of developing special powers related to luck, doom, destruction, misdirection and etc.

It had to be Middle Demons.

Feeding the Prophet's Bane with Minor Demons was useless as the gap in strength was too big.

Compared to directly feeding the Middle Demons to the Prophet's Bane, Ves preferred to make it stronger through gu cultivation because the ritualistic process was not only a lot more effective, but would also make the survival more ruthless and battle-hardened.

Unfortunately, Ves could not guarantee whether his chosen pick would win in a free-for-all where it would be surrounded by proven killers.

This was why he rigged the game beforehand.

He made use of Blinky to artificially weaken the Middle Demons that he designated as sacrifices.

After all, there were no rules that stated that gu cultivation had to be completely fair. What went on inside the Demon Mixer after he closed the lid was none of his business, but anything that happened before the start of the sacred feeding frenzy was still under his control!

While it was theoretically possible for one of the weakened underdogs to defy the odds and come out on top, this should be a low-probability event.

Ves thanked his luck when the Demon Mixer did not produce a surprise.

He did not know whether it had snacked on the weakened Middle Demons like a tyrant or fought an arduous struggle of survival after becoming their collective enemy.

All that mattered was that the Prophet's Bane had become a much stronger and more tempered Middle Demon than before.

It had lost much of its lethargy and displayed a great amount of energy and hostility, which was exactly what Ves wanted to see.

In his opinion, the stronger and more active the Middle Demon, the more dramatic the final result.

Ves did not hesitate to put the Prophet's Bane into several more rounds of gu cultivation.

He did not have that many suitable Middle Demons to spare, so the Prophet's Bane was not able to devour too many of its evil brethren.

However, the biggest difference this time was that Ves did not deliberately sabotage the competition. The Prophet's Bane had to fight them at their full strength, which posed a considerably greater challenge, but also rewarded him a lot more with every fallen enemy.

The end result was the most powerful Middle Demon that Ves had produced to date.

While there was still a long way to go before the Prophet's Bane could reach the threshold to Greater Demon, it was definitely a lot more powerful and vicious than the Bitter Swordsman!

Gloriana grew more and more unsettled by its appearance.

"I thought these demons are a dark mirror to the spirits that you make. Why does it lack a solid shape?"

“Because the Prophet’s Bane is chaotic by nature.” Ves responded. “Whatever he or she used to be in life, all that is left of the ancient failed prophet is this cloud. I think that parts of its ‘body’ keeps fluctuating from black to gray and all of the tints in between is because of the mutability of future timelines and the inability to make completely accurate predictions. I won’t bore you with my full theories and speculations about it, but you can trust that my targeted measures have strengthened its special attributes.”

“Which you doubtlessly calibrated for an iteration of the Mark III that is distinctly weaker than what we managed to produce this time.” Gloriana pointedly said. “Are you sure you want to proceed with your original plan despite all of the mutations that have occurred? I have told you this before, and I will say it again. I fear for Venerable Orfan’s life and safety. I feel you are in a similar position to General Ark Larkinson when he led a small elite strike force against the Emperor Tree back on Reticula Corein V. You know how that mission ended. Venerable Imon Ingvar lost his life, and the Saint Commander lost her brother.”

Making this comparison was a low blow. Ves knew that she was doing this for his own sake. He could not afford the stigma of becoming a mech designer who killed a mech pilot due to reckless experimentation related to mechs.

Gloriana also wanted to protect Venerable Orfan from losing her life due to overestimating her ability to control the D-mech that Ves was about to make.

A mech designer had an obligation to protect mech pilots from their own mistakes and misjudgements if need be. After all, the former possessed a much more comprehensive understanding of the risk and dangers of different mechs.

Ves found it rather tricky to respond to her arguments this time because she directly appealed to his professionalism.

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Chapter 7228: For the Mech that Defies Reality

Chapter 7228: For the Mech that Defies Reality

If Gloriana thought that she could rein her husband in by appealing to his professionalism, then she was sorely mistaken.

Ves could bend any rule as long as he was driven by his passion!

He only had a bottom line so long as it served his interests.

When it turned into an obstacle, then he would grasp onto any excuse that gave him an opportunity to circumvent the rules!

Ves smirked and crossed his arms as he leaned against the cell of the Prophet's Bane.

The creepy Middle Demon seemed oblivious to the pair of mech designers standing outside.

The dark and ominous cloud continued to hover senselessly like a turbulent storm cloud without lighting bolts.

"What is my design philosophy?"

"As far as I know, you prefer to define it as Mutual Growth In Adversity."

Ves waved his hand towards the direction of the Demoncasting Forge. "Is the Riot Mark III not the epitome of my design philosophy? Out of all of the living mechs that I have made so far, this particular machine is the first one that aligns much closer to the latest evolution of my design philosophy. Instead of designing a living mech that is purposefully made to be as friendly and facilitating to its mech pilot as possible, I have reversed this relationship."

"No offense, Ves, but that sounds backwards to me. It is as if you have taken a cart that already works as intended, but replace its perfectly round wheels with square blocks. You may claim that you are giving the poor horses a better workout, but what you are actually doing is purposefully hindering their work."

"That is a flawed analogy, Gloriana. It only holds up so long as Venerable Rosa Orfan is still stalled by her bottleneck. What if those horses work so hard to drag their carts forward that they break past their limits and evolve into pegasi? Once they have transcended into a more superior form of steed, those evolved draft animals will find it much easier to haul a cart with square wheels. That is the goal that I am aiming for. Venerable Joshua's contentious relationship with the Bitter Scimitar has already provided preliminary proof that this kind of adversarial relationship can stimulate the growth and evolution of a mech pilot. The Riot Mark III is the logical progression of this experimental approach."

His wife still looked disapproving.

"The fact that you admit that this is an experiment indicates that you are aware that the outcome may not turn out as well as you hope. The worst outcome is a ruined expert mech and a dead expert pilot. The second-worst outcome is an accident that causes Venerable Orfan to become severely injured and put into a long-term coma. The third-worst outcome is another accident that causes the expert pilot to suffer such severe contamination that no trace of her original personality is left."

"Gloriana..."

"Have you ever thought about what would happen if the Prophet's Bane manages to resist her willpower and wins the contest? The fact that you have also turned the Riot Mark III into a

Carmine mech will allow the demonic entity to inflict even greater damage to the vulnerable expert pilot.”

Her fears were not entirely unfounded. Ves had conducted a similar experiment a long time ago that had led to a permanently altered mech pilot.

He wondered what happened to that fellow. Ves had lost track of his test subject a long time ago. The changed pilot should still be struggling somewhere in the old galaxy.

Anyway, he was not ignorant of the consequences of failure, whether partial or complete.

That did not mean he had any intentions to stop at this point.

“I acknowledge the risks, Gloriana, but do you know what? I believe in my vision. What is more important is that Venerable Orfan also believes in my work. I have warned her about the risks and danger multiple times, including just before. You have heard her answers. Her intuition is not a joke. She is always aware of how much of a risk she is taking, but she is not as risk-averse as you. She is a soldier. She is a champion. It is her job to overcome challenges. In her mind, if she isn’t able to defeat her own mech, then she isn’t qualified to defeat the enemy powerhouses that she is truly hungry to defeat. Giving her a conventional living mech will not help her all that much. What I offer is a more fitting solution.”

His wife shook her head in disapproval. “Not every mech pilot’s desire should be met. Our clients and customers often make unrealistic or outright counterproductive demands. It is our responsibility as mech designers to filter out the dangerous and give them what they can make use of without endangering themselves. What you are doing puts the entire mech industry under threat.”

“Enough.” Ves finally told her. “You can keep arguing with me, but you will not change anything. My mind is set. I am going through with my plan. Please stay silent and let me finish the final step without interruption. I need total concentration for what comes next.”

Listening to his wife did not dissuade him at all. She only strengthened his determination as he sought to prove her wrong.

He began to make the arrangements. The Demon Prison helpfully allowed a user to transfer any captive demon to the Demoncasting Forge without giving it any chance to escape.

The Prophet’s Bane had no choice but to be prepped for transformation by the merciless claws of the forge.

Ves and his silent but judgmental wife entered the side chamber where the Demoncasting Molds rested.

Ideally, the best way to perform Demoncasting was to create a custom mold based on every individual case, but Ves had yet to reach that level.

He had made a lot of strides since the first time he tried out Demoncasting.

Of the molds that he had used most often and grown familiar with, the Attack Enhancement Demoncasting Mold held a favored status in his mind.

It was simple but broadly applicable. It could enhance the lethality of any weapon in a direct and unambiguous fashion.

However, Ves had also developed a distaste for it due to its inefficiency and its lack of depth.

He regarded it as a fallback option if he failed to come up with a more suitable selection.

He considered the Defense Enhancement Demoncasting Mold to function in a similar manner.

They took any demon and crudely casted it into a device to make it tougher and stronger in the most direct possible fashion.

Ves did not want to choose this mold to create his first D-mech.

He knew that the chances were greater that he would gain a stable result if he used the Defense Enhancement Demoncasting Mold, but he would never forgive himself for forgoing a superior option that might have been able to produce a superior result.

The Riot Mark III was not lacking in hard defenses. He already possessed a new and unprecedented superdimensional archemetal energized armor system.

Even if all of these technological boons was not enough to make the latest iteration of the Riot invincible, then Venerable Orfan's willpower could easily amplify the defensive power of the armor system to another level!

The amplification would become even more exaggerated if she managed to become a saint!

No. Ves did not design the Riot Mark III to function as a purely defensive mech. The Bastion already existed for that purpose.

The expert spearman mech needed to become a force of chaos and disruption.

He had to wield offense as a form of defense, and defense as a form of offense.

The Riot Mark III needed to become a machine that defied classification, defied calculations, defied predictions and above all else, defied expectations.

In other words, Ves aspired to create a machine that ran counter to logic rather than abide by its cold numbers.

It needed to do the impossible every second it existed and behave as if it was another tuesday.

What Ves wanted was to create a machine that spat in the face of the Polymath's predictive models and surpassed his mother's elusive plans.

A part of Ves even dreamed of becoming the Riot.

Only then would he truly be able to unmoor himself from the shackles of fate and the machinations of others.

Perhaps that may explain why he was so eager to push this experiment to such an extreme.

The project had become a shuttle where the pilot constantly held up the acceleration lever.

He had not slowed down for anything and kept speeding forward to the point where the vehicle could crash as soon as it encountered a single obstacle in its route.

Ves grinned. That was exactly the way he liked it. If he wanted to go big, then he should do it all the way.

“Which mold will you choose?” Gloriana finally broke her silence. “As far as I know, there is no pre-made mold here that aligns with the attributes of the Riot Mark III.”

“You’re right.” He told her. “That is why we need to select a mold that comes close enough. The fit doesn’t have to be perfect. What matters more is that it can best channel the properties of the Prophet’s Bane into the Riot Mark III.”

Should he pick darkness and turn the Riot Mark III into an even more malevolent entity?

Ves developed quite a strong affinity towards the darkness attribute. While he had no way of mastering all of its facets, he possessed a slightly greater comprehension of a handful of related concepts such as corruption, weakening and most recently negation.

However, he did not think this was a suitable choice. The coating of the Riot Mark III was striped orange and loud, turning him into a dazzling presence that oozed presence. The machine craved attention, and performed best when he was in the light.

What about the death attribute?

That was also a rather poor fit. The Riot Mark III was not designed to reap lives en masse, or harness the power of death to enhance the lethality of his strikes. Using a mold based on the death element would just muddle up his creation.

Ves’ eyes continued to rake across the rows and rows of molds. Each of them presented very different ways of channeling the power of a captive demon into an object.

The essence of Demoncasting was not demons. It was the molds.

The former consisted of raw ingredients, while the latter represented technology.

It was only through developing understanding of certain phenomena before using that to create devices that could bend them to one’s will that humans ascended to the stars.

Ves hungered for knowledge on how to create his own molds, but since he was not able to do so, he would settle for studying them and using them to figure out their working principles.

After contemplating his choices for another minute, his eyes finally settled on a certain mold.

“This one will do.” He said with a determined expression.

His wife raised a single eyebrow. “Out of all of the choices you could make, you want to make use of the Prophecy Imbuement Demoncasting Mold. I... did not even know the System supplied this mold. This is... an incomprehensible choice.”

“It makes perfect sense!” Ves grinned. “Prophet’s Bane is originally based on a failed prophet. I don’t know how much of that is left in the Middle Demon, but it shouldn’t have forgotten its roots. I have a feeling that focusing on channeling its flawed power of prophecy into an expert mech that exists to defy this phenomenon will lead to a very interesting contradiction. Sparks will fly. Conflicts will occur. I have no way of predicting the results, but what I hope to gain from this collision is an expert mech that becomes even more effective at upending probabilities!”

What Ves sought was to strengthen the Riot Mark III’s existing metaphysical properties to the greatest possible extent!

He was willing to forgo further enhancements into offense, defense, speed or other hard properties in order to strengthen the mystery of his latest creation!

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Chapter 7229: Start of the Death Match

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After Ves selected his demoncasting mold, he and his wife returned to the area where the process was about to take place.

By this time, his wife had completely divested herself of all responsibility. She questioned his actions and witnessed his decisions, but did nothing further. She neither stood in his way or supported his risky endeavor. This was her way to express her disapproval without breaking their relationship entirely.

Ves knew that he had to compensate her afterwards for being so tolerant. He knew how difficult it was for her to witness one of her ‘babies’ getting corrupted in front of her eyes.

Demoncasting had always put a foul taste in her mouth. The more she learned about this unholy process, the more she abhorred the entire concept of it. In her opinion, the perfect vessel should be pure and utterly free without taint. The Lionheart piloted by the so-called Saint General was one of the most representative examples of the ideal she tried to realize

Ves used to agree with her stance, but no longer.

In his opinion, a living mech did not always have to be a completely reliable and accommodating entity.

Certain mech pilots that did not fear adversity could benefit much more from piloting more powerful but also less stable machines.

Trading stability for power not only gave the pilots an edge that was difficult to replicate, but also kept them stimulated no matter how peaceful the situation might be. The automatic growth of demonic entities and the constant struggle for power between mech and mech pilot would force the latter to exist in a constant state of crisis.

This was not a big deal if it was related to a regular D-mech or D-arm.

If the mech pilot or warrior in question could no longer control his weapon effectively enough, he could always exchange it for another product.

The problem with this particular case was that Ves had converted the Riot Mark III into a Carmine mech.

Although Venerable Orfan could choose not to interface with the help of the Carmine System for the first time, Ves believed that she could never bring herself to reject this challenge.

She wanted to fight a contest of will and power against her D-mech in the most absolute terms possible!

The expert pilot was even willing to cut off her retreat route and accept the possibility of death in order to raise the stakes to the maximum possible level!

Venerable Orfan had studied the exceptional breakthrough conditions of her peers. She did not think she was better than any of them, only worse. That meant that in her mind, she needed to drive herself to an even greater level of desperation to dismantle her bottleneck!

This reassured Ves. Every time he entertained doubts, he thought about what his client wanted from him. She did not ask for a controllable and obedient mech. She asked for the most ruthless and extreme breakthrough machine that he could supply. These were two entirely different demands. What he was doing was not completely unhinged. He was just being a responsible mech designer by fulfilling the demands of a client.

Of course, Ves conveniently set aside the fact that the risk factors of this project had blown way past all reasonable safety standards.

Even the Design Department could not tolerate the uncomfortably high possibility of death or debilitation!

It was a good thing that Gloriana was powerless to stop him. If she was in charge, she would have definitely made the call to stop now that they had produced a flawed but tolerable expert mech.

When Ves looked at the Riot Mark III that had been placed in the center of the Demoncasting area, he truly felt it was a pity to subject this finely crafted and engineered product to barely controllable demonic corruption.

Based on his improved understanding of demonology, Ves understood the truth of Demoncasting a little better.

What he was about to do was not much different from letting demons directly possess powerful artifacts.

The use of Demoncasting Molds was meant to add more direction and control over the process.

Ves had never made use of the Prophecy Imbuement Demoncasting Mold, but he could guess its purpose easily enough.

According to a normal process, the use of this mold should allow the casted demon to impart its prescient abilities to an artifact.

Of course, the demon had to possess this capability in the first place, or else much of its power would go to waste due to the mismatch in properties.

As long as the artifact successfully transformed into an appropriate D-arm, Ves could easily imagine the weapon gaining the capability to read the actions of enemies in advance.

This could be useful in creating many useful applications.

For example, Ves could create a bell that would ring in alarm as soon as hidden enemies with ill intentions had sneaked close.

He could develop a shield generator that generated powerful but fairly small directional energy shields just in time to block an incoming attack.

He could also create a duelist sword that could grant its wielder short glimpses of what happened a second later to avoid mistakes and take advantage of fleeting opportunities.

In short, the Prophecy Imbuement Demoncasting Mold had a lot of wonderful uses. The only difficulty was finding a demon that possessed an affinity for the prophecy attribute, which was very rare.

That made this particular Demoncasting attempt so interesting to Ves.

As a mech designer who constantly wanted to experiment with novel situations, nothing could interest him more than bringing opposing elements together and watching the resulting excitement.

He had purposefully engineered a circumstance where he was about to stuff a Middle Demon derived from a failed prophet into a living mech that existed to break prophecies.

Conventional logic dictated that bringing two completely incompatible elements together would cause them to cancel each other out, either quietly or loudly.

“I really hope that doesn’t happen.”

Since Demoncasting dealt with living demons and living artifacts, the outcome of a forced confrontation could never be predicted with complete certainty.

Anything could happen, from complete repulsion of the demon to an uneasy coexistence between the old and new artifact spirits.

That made the process more exciting. The possibilities of failure made successful outcomes even juicier.

“C’mon.”

As soon as Ves set all of the parameters and checked them multiple times, he finally activated the unholy process.

“It’s starting.”

The Demoncasting Forge already restrained the Riot Mark III as soon as he arrived.

This came in handy as the expert mech spontaneously activated on his own and tried to wiggle away!

The machine knew that something extremely unpleasant was about to happen!

Unfortunately, the machine was unable to muster enough strength and leverage to free himself from his bonds.

While the Riot Mark III engaged in a futile act of resistance, the Prophet’s Bane got tossed in the dark red demonic flame that was constantly burning.

The Middle Demon did not scream, but its amorphous cloudy form began to shake in obvious pain!

It even lost its monochrome colors and began to acquire more red until it looked like a hot coal made out of cloud!

As the Middle Demon was slowly burning up, it began to lash out with whatever messy powers it had at its disposal.

Unfortunately for this malevolent existence, no one could hear its screams or become affected by its reality-bending powers. The ruthless flames devoured every scrap of loose energy and began to burn away at the essence of this evil being, beginning with its weakest and most fragile parts.

Ves paid close attention to this refinement process.

The Demoncasting process was mostly automatic, but that did not mean that he could sit back and relax.

He still needed to rely on his judgement and understanding to trigger the right steps at the right time.

He continued to let the Prophet's Bane burn. The cloud of red exuded a sense of pain that made Ves uncomfortable despite the level of protection offered by the Demoncasting Forge.

His wife also grew less comfortable with the sight.

She found creation based on suffering to be a distasteful practice.

The only reasons why she put up with it was because it mattered to Ves and because the results might be able to justify the process.

Gloriana was not blind to the various crises threatening red humanity. She pretty much made peace with the fact that desperate times sometimes called for desperate measures.

That did not mean she was willing to do the dirty deed herself.

Ves paid no attention to his wife's contemplations.

He focused all of his attention on the condition of the roasting demon.

He needed to find the right moment to pull it out of the demonic flames.

Too soon, and the demon would not be malleable enough to mold into the right shape inside the artifact.

Too late, and the demon would lose far too much strength and personality, thereby reducing the benefits it brought to the Riot Mark III.

Ves narrowed his eyes. He used all of his senses to understand the Middle Demon's condition.

Although the Prophet's Bane was definitely suffering a form of pain that was indescribable, Ves felt no sympathy for the demonic entity.

He wanted the Middle Demon to retain as much of its power and feistiness as possible, but it would do him no good if he pulled it out prematurely.

Ves had the illusion that he had turned into a chef that was about to cook a priceless piece of steak on a barbecue grill.

He needed to cook his 'meat' just right so that it became wonderfully browned on the outside, but juicy and pink on the inside.

This was hardly a good analogy, but it was the best way to quickly describe the current process.

It was all too easy to pull it out too soon and serve a steak that was very rare on the inside and not enough browned on the outside.

He may also pull it out too late, causing him to end up with a tough dark brown steak down to the very center.

While those 'steaks' were still edible, they were not the results he was aiming for. He needed to refine the Middle Demon to the perfect degree.

Just as the Prophet's Bane was about to turn brighter and more golden, Ves abruptly fished it out of the demonic flames and hastily pressed it into the Prophecy Imbuement Demoncasting Mold!

He immediately activated the command that caused an apparatus to press the mold directly onto the shackled mech!

"It's happening!" Ves uttered in excitement! "The Middle Demon is clashing against the living mech!"

The Riot Mark III turned into an arena that was being contested by two very different 'artifact spirits'.

Different to how Ves and the Dark Apostle competed over their shared true body but eventually came to an uneasy sharing agreement, the Prophet's Bane and the original Riot could never bring themselves to make peace with each other!

The Middle Demon was too feral, irrational and violent to even think about compromise!

The original living mech hated the thought of sharing and wanted to prove that he was worthy enough to remain Venerable Rosa Orfan's battle partner!

The two instinctively understood each other's positioning and fought a match to the death as soon as they came into contact with each other.

The Riot Mark III shook and vibrated as the two entities savagely tore at each other without any regard for caution.

Holding back or being timid would only cause them to lose momentum and get themselves killed!

The only way for them to survive and win the death match was to fight more ruthlessly than their enemy!

Ves initially expected for the powerful Prophet's Bane to gain an immediate advantage in this fight. Its power level and threat level was higher according to his senses.

Surprisingly enough, the living mech was putting up a surprisingly good fight!

The original Riot had accompanied an expert pilot for a long time and enjoyed years worth of low-level willpower baptism. That had strengthened it in many ways and allowed him to withstand and endure far greater pressure than normal!

Another advantage enjoyed by the living mech was that it benefited from a home ground advantage.

The Riot Mark III was its vessel for a very long time, and it knew exactly how to draw strength from the mech frame in order to put up a better fight.

The death match was not about to end in a short amount of time!

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Chapter 7230: Gloriana's Shame

Chapter 7230: Gloriana's Shame

"This... is awful." Gloriana said as she grew more and more queasy. "When I designed the Riot Mark III, I never meant for this to happen. Living mechs are not supposed to be punished for the mistakes of their pilots. It is not the Riot's fault that Venerable Orfan has failed to break through up until this point. If she wants to become an ace pilot so badly, then she should first look into herself before obsessing over her mech."

Ves let out a sigh. "I get where you are coming from, honey, but I do not think this is a bad development. No matter who wins or loses, the fact that two spirits had to compete against each other in a ritualistic death match will only further imbue our work with chaos and conflict. I can tell that the living mech likes it. A long time ago, I let the mech frame absorb an Unstable Chaos Essence gem. This is the starting point of the Riot Mark III degeneration. Everything that has happened since that point has ultimately led to this situation."

His wife frowned for a moment. "Are you saying that the Riot was destined to 'fall' like an angel being cast down from heaven into hell?"

"Not so dramatic, but yes. That is roughly what I am saying. The Riot Mark II was a fine mech, but he was only chaotic in a half-hearted fashion. I was limited by the available methods and materials that I had access to at the time. Enough years have passed for me to make up for these shortcomings. The Mark III upgrade is finally able to bring my true vision to life. The current iteration of the Riot is finally on the cusp where he can finally embrace his true nature."

"Or lose everything."

"Yes."

The silent but intense struggle for dominance continued. The intruder may be a complete stranger in the Riot Mark III, but he was a Middle Demon who had fought and devoured dozens of his peers through successive gu cultivation rituals.

There was no way the Prophet's Bane would give up after suffering a single setback!

The Riot Mark III suddenly changed. The mech frame did not develop any weird spikes or exaggerated angles, but Ves could nonetheless sense that one of the machine's shoulder plates had become subtly wrong.

When he focused his gaze at it, he had the illusion that it was a millimeter short in one moment, and several millimeters too long in the next moment.

The mass, the dimensions, the angles and even the way the light reflected from its surface constantly shifted in a manner that was unnoticeable to most people.

To Ves, it felt as if he was looking at an optical illusion, but he knew that this was not exactly false.

He had a strong feeling that what he was seeing was a manifestation of probability manipulation that directly altered reality!

The phenomenon initially confined itself to the shoulder plate, but it was steadily spreading outwards like a virus.

The chest plating, arm plating and other parts gradually began to exhibit the same phenomenon. The effects remained subtle, but even laymen would instinctively be able sense that something about the Riot Mark III was wrong.

Even his wife could not ignore this subtle but disturbing sight. "Is this... contamination?"

Ves nodded. "I guess so. Not every form of demonic contamination produces wicked spikes and so on. The choice of Demoncasting Molds is a big factor. This one does not seek to empower anything directly related to combat or physical attributes. The mold that I have chosen is solely designed to strengthen a mech's relation to prophecy. The mold works very differently from the other ones I have used so far. While it is a pity to filter out the properties of the demon that is good at direct offense and such, I kind of like this subtle directional improvement more. It is very focused and it is doing a good job of amplifying the properties that will make the Riot Mark III unique."

He cared a lot about creating unique mechs. It was hard to create any machine that stood out and became iconic throughout the generations.

There were just too many mech designers out there. Their combined output was massive even if Ves limited his consideration to the mech industry of the Red Ocean. All of the normal ideas had already been tried out, so if he wanted to create a truly unique and unforgettable mech, it could only be done by resorting to radical deviations.

The corruption continued to spread.

The Prophet's Bane was no idiot. It had fought against so many powerful peers that the living mech did not discourage it in the slightest.

Despite its feral irrational state, the molded demon did not crash directly into its adversary.

Instead, the Prophet's Bane instinctively understood that it was better to dig in and capture ground step-by-step.

It focused all of its energy into conquering the shoulder plating first. The concentration of power was enough to overcome the living mech's resistance.

From there, the Prophet's Bane was able to rely on its initial foothold to expand its territory.

This strategy of gradual assimilation prevented the living mech from making full use of its home ground.

The more territory got eroded, the less powerful the living mech became.

In the end, the outcome of this competition was already set since the moment the defender lost his first piece of territory.

The Prophet's Bane was inexhaustible. It had put in a huge amount of effort to conquer the first few territories, but after its opponent gradually started to weaken, its advantage continued to snowball.

When more and more of the mech frame began to show the same signs of subtle incongruity, both Ves and Gloriana knew that the takeover was almost over.

Venerable Orfan's battle partner had put up a valiant fight, but it was ultimately unable to defend itself against a powerful demonic invader that had been strengthened numerous times.

If the Riot Mark III was already an ace mech that had undergone substantial amounts of willpower baptism, then the outcome might have been completely different.

Alas, the Riot Mark III was only the companion of a high-ranking mech pilot of the first major cultivation rank.

In the face of Middle Demon that corresponded to the second major cultivation rank, it was unable to make use of his home ground advantages to prove he was worthy enough to remain alive.

The Riot Mark III began to settle down as the Prophet's Bane claimed the spoils of his righteous victory.

It began to absorb and assimilate as many pieces of the original living mech as possible.

However, this did not entirely go smoothly. The defeated spirit possessed a notable affinity for chaos.

When the Prophet's Bane inherited this trait among others, the victor experienced a growing degree of discomfort as numerous opposing attributes began to war against each other!

The Prophet's Bane had become an existence of opposing attributes and concepts. It was unable to reconcile the new with the old and began to suffer for this reason!

As the Prophet's Bane suffered the punishment for its gluttonous appetite, Ves and Gloriana continued to monitor the condition of the Riot mark III.

"A living mech got murdered today." Gloriana flatly said. "The Riot accompanied Venerable Rosa Orfan for multiple years. He had grown alongside his battle partner through multiple important battles. They were both comrades in arms. Even if we did not have a good use for him anymore, he at least deserved a peaceful retirement. Instead, you threw him to a big bad wolf. Are you happy with this, Ves?"

He smiled. "I am. I think you are deliberately overlooking the fact that the Riot consented to this treatment. Like pilot, like mech. The living mech wants to become stronger in order to serve his battle partner better. He has already accepted that if he is not up to par, then he would accept an outcome where his competitor took over the mech frame and became Venerable Orfan's new battle partner. No matter how this competition would end, the pilot would always gain the better partner. All I can say is that the Riot is truly dedicated to his partner to be willing to disregard his own life and continued existence."

"...I really cannot understand how you can talk yourself into such a twisted outcome. This is still wrong. You should not have to sacrifice any life, no matter whether it is a human or a living mech, to develop superior mechs. Even if all of these evil methods are effective, we cannot become overreliant on them to the point where we have forgotten how to design mechs that are strong without making use of blood sacrifices or soul devouring."

His wife made a good point. Ves was making use of 'unconventional solutions' to develop mechs that were substantially stronger and more effective than what he could normally produce.

Results were important, but mech designers generally valued the processes more.

After the Prophet's Bane had become the undeniable victor and spiritual counterpart of the Riot Mark III, the D-mech had reached its final form.

The machine seemed to transform in a subtle but different way than before.

Both Ves and Gloriana immediately recognized it as a masterwork transformation.

The problem was that this was happening on a demonic mech. The subtle distortion effect generated by the Prophet's Bane blended with the effects of the masterwork transformation, causing many changes that should have improved the overall quality of the expert mech to appear slightly skewed.

It was like looking at a funhouse version of a masterwork transformation. The distortions caused perfections to look flawed, and imperfections to look even more ridiculous.

Ves all found it to be an incredibly novel sight, but his wife had a completely different reaction!

"I think I am going to be sick..."

Gloriana was abhorred by what was happening! The masterwork transformation applied to a mech that embodied the concepts of chaos and misdirection generated the most unusual sight that she had ever seen.

The Riot Mark III was supposed to be the 12th masterwork mech that she had brought into life, but she feared that after witnessing this horrendous sight, she would never be able to bring herself to claim credit for this work!

At this point, she did not even desire the masterwork certificate for this abominable machine. To call it a masterwork was a mockery as the machine's strengthened chaotic nature tried its best to turn itself back into a flawed state.

Once the masterwork transformation finally came to an end, both of them knew that the Riot Mark III had finally reached its final form.

"It is... amazing." Ves sighed with genuine appreciation. "I know you don't share my opinion, but this is a significant advancement of my design philosophy. I have experimented with the concept of designing an adversarial living mech in the past, but those were weak and half-hearted attempts. The Riot Mark III is the first instance where I think I can truly make this concept show its value and succeed. Venerable Orfan will not have a pleasant time when piloting this machine, but so long as her willpower is strong enough, she will gain far more advantages than disadvantages from piloting her reinvented steed."

The Riot Mark III was the most radical upgrade yet applied to any high-ranking living mech of the Larkinson Clan.

The latest transformations of other fine machines such as the Dark Zephyr Mark III, the Amaranto Mark III, the Minerva Mark II and even the First Sword Mark III could not compare to the gulf between the Riot Mark II and the Mark III.

This had wide implications for other upgrade candidates.

"I hope you are not thinking about turning all of our future high-ranking mechs into D-mechs." Gloriana said with a slightly pleading tone.

Ves briefly reined in his ecstasy and enthusiasm. "Don't worry. I haven't lost my sanity. The product has to fit the user. I know that most mech pilots are not asking for an adversarial living mech. I will strictly reserve this design application for those who lack confidence in themselves and do not have the patience to build up their strength over a longer period of time."

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Chapter 7231: The Completion of the First D-Mech

Chapter 7231: The Completion of the First D-Mech

After the pair of mech designers beheld their first D-mech, they waited in silence for a time.

Gloriana looked as if she was struggling to decide whether to cut all of her ties to the corrupted masterwork expert mech. She seriously thought about withdrawing from all future obligations to the machine, which mainly entailed conducting repairs and upgrading the D-mech in the future.

The original Riot Mark III presented by the mech design was still an acceptable product despite its many eccentricities.

The new Riot Mark III that had undergone Demoncasting turned into a completely different beast that she could not recognize anymore.

She refused to admit that this monstrosity could ever serve as the perfect vessel for its intended pilot.

Gloriana strongly believed that there should have been a better way to meet the needs of Venerable Rosa Orfan.

If she was a better mech designer, then she should have been able to design an excellent high-tier expert mech that could give Venerable Orfan the confidence she needed to stimulate her breakthrough.

Unfortunately, she couldn't. Gloriana recognized that she had yet to reach this level. She could only work together with her husband and rely on his Class IX design philosophy to make up for her shortcomings.

This would not last forever. Once she became strong enough to design powerful enough mechs by herself, she would no longer have to tolerate her husband's antics without having the ability to object.

She looked forward to realizing this future.

As for now, the only thing she could do was hold in her disapproval and make the best out of a bad situation.

"Strange."

"What is it, Gloriana?"

"The physical mutations of the Riot Mark III are much less severe than your previously made D-arms. Not only that, but it is also manifesting in a drastically different manner. There are no weird

spikes. It actually still looks close enough to the original design. If not for the constant subtle distortion effect, I wouldn't have been able to recognize it as a D-mech in the first place. Why do you think this is the case?"

"Hmm." Ves had already been thinking about this mystery. "I have several possible explanations. For one, unlike the Attack and Defense Enhancement Demoncasting Molds, the Prophecy Imbuement Demoncasting Mold works very differently. The former two take any form of useful energy and sloppily channels that into broad enhancements. The latter is more selective and precise. The prophecy-oriented mold cuts out a lot more pollution, which means that there is much less spare energy left to produce questionable and unproductive mutations."

That sounded like a decent explanation, but Gloriana was not entirely convinced.

"Another possible explanation is that the use of a much more powerful Middle Demon may have increased the efficiency of the Demoncasting process. It could also be that the Prophet's Bane simply hates the Riot Mark III to the point it does not even desire to corrupt the mech in its entirety. It may also be that the fight between the Prophet's Bane and the original living mech has prevented the former from wasting its energy on useless mutations. A final explanation may be that as the Prophet's Bane won the contest of dominion and devoured the essence of the living mech, it has achieved a relatively perfect fit with the mech frame, thereby making further mutations redundant. Who knows what the real answer may be. Multiple reasons may be valid."

Ves truly did not know the answers. There were too many possibilities for him to consider. Lack of data and proof prevented him from figuring out the truth.

It didn't matter. Ves was not obsessed over controlling the physical mutations triggered by Demoncasting.

The main lesson he derived from this attempt was that Demoncasting did not always result in an object growing sharp and mean-looking spikes.

Their physical transformations could be a lot subtler and low-key. The latest outcome was pretty much close to the ideal that Ves tried to attain when it came to Demoncasting. He wanted the physical transformations to be as minimal and restrained as possible.

Doing this would not only make it harder for enemies to recognize the tell-tale characteristic of D-mechs and D-arms, but also prevent enemies from purposefully hunting them down.

"I need to experiment more with the Prophecy Imbuement Demoncasting Mold." Ves said with growing determination. "I think that my theory that examined the broad applicability of the more general mold and the tighter focus of more specialized mold is true. I had my doubts about whether I came close to the truth, but no more. This outcome already explains much. It at least gives me hope that not all of my D-mechs and D-arms have to come in the form of evil-looking products that are covered with self-harming spikes."

That was a big relief. Ves did not want his work to become defined by this provocative visual style.

He quite liked the demonic manifestation on the Riot Mark III. It could still pass off as a normal mech. At most, people who observed the machine directly would feel as if the machine was under the influence of a powerful jamming or interference field.

The enemies who fought against the Riot Mark III in person would eventually discover that the strange distortions were not just cosmetic.

Gloriana glanced at her husband.

"Are you waiting for something to happen?"

"Hm?"

"You look as if you are hesitating on whether to approach the completed mech."

Ves responded with a sardonic smile. "To be honest, you are right. I was waiting to see if a lightning storm would form above our heads. It wouldn't be the first time the heavenly authorities responded this way whenever I created a work that is... boundary breaking. I still do not understand the conditions which can trigger this response. Does my work have to exceed a power threshold or violate fundamental taboos? I have no idea. I was 60 percent certain that all of the stuff I have done to the Riot Mark III merits a lightning tribulation, but... nothing."

"Perhaps it is because the effects of Demoncasting are not significant enough... yet." Gloriana theorized. "The heavens will not be able to ignore your works once you are able to produce better results. Another theory is that this Demoncasting Forge is somehow able to drastically reduce the occurrence of lightning tribulations. I can imagine that this may have been built into the facility in order to prevent the demonic artifacts from encountering their nemesis in the form of tribulation lightning."

The latter theory sounded more plausible than the former, but they had no proof that either of them were true.

"Well, if it hasn't happened now, it probably won't happen at all for this iteration." Ves said as he relaxed his tense muscles.

"You sound disappointed."

"I suppose I am. Although lightning tribulations are troublesome, I am still incredibly confident in our work. You know how much damage it can withstand with the help of its full superdimensional archemetal energized armor system. The insanely powerful defenses should be more than enough to compensate for a demonic artifact's inherent vulnerability against tribulation lightning. So long as the Riot Mark III passes this test, it will automatically grow stronger and more exceptional, just as is the case for the Dominion of Man."

Perhaps the heavens understood his underlying motivations, because they had withheld their tribulation lightning this time.

What a bummer.

Ves and Gloriana cautiously approached and began to inspect the Riot Mark III. They still kept the finished D-mech restrained, not trusting it to remain dormant after the Prophet's Bane had settled into its new home.

Up close, the sense of disturbance grew a lot stronger. It was as if Ves and Gloriana had approached a part of space that suffered from crazy glitches.

Their vision grew confused. Their sense of gravity and balance became disturbed. The mech sometimes appeared close and the next time further away.

Both of them shuddered.

"I hope this is the last time you create a mech that just feels wrong up close." Gloriana grumbled. "The Riot Mark III has become unnatural. I have a growing impression that it does not deserve to exist at all. I never get this feeling with other mechs, even ones that I would rather wish they had never been designed. I truly feel that the Riot Mark III has broken one too many boundaries."

The Riot mark III most certainly broke limits, some less acceptable than others.

Its existence would most certainly cause the parts of the Red Association to complain. This would especially be the case if Venerable Orfan's life came under serious threat.

The more her life became impacted by bonding to an actively hostile and dangerous machine, the greater the backlash from the mech community.

The Riot Mark III openly defied the principles that had ensured that mech pilots could unquestionably trust the products developed by mech designers across multiple centuries.

Yet now that Ves had brought this unprecedented D-mech to life, he may have started a trend that would not lead to any condemnation by mech pilots across the Red Ocean.

Instead, they may actually adopt mentalities similar to Venerable Orfan and believe that his so-called 'adversarial mechs' may actually be the best way to promote their breakthroughs!

Ves did not dare to go too far and make such a bold claim. He most definitely believed that more mech pilots could benefit from piloting such a machine, but he was not about to design a mass market version and endanger millions of customers who had overestimated their capabilities.

Besides, he doubted that he could mass produce such mechs in the first place considering they needed to be Demoncasted with at least Minor Demons.

While it was technically possible to mass-produce D-mechs, the supply of Minor Demons was not free.

Helena needed to work hard to gather a huge amount of souls and convert them into Minor Demons.

Ves did not have the heart to ask his eldest sister to labor so much on his behalf. It would be better if he came up with an apparatus that could automate this process, but that was a whole other thing.

"So what do you think, Ves. Will the Riot Mark III successfully stimulate Rosa Orfan's breakthrough? Will she be able to tame this machine? Or will this be the first D-mech that has also claimed its intended user?"

"I literally cannot predict that, honey." He replied in an exasperated tone. "There are too many unknown variables in play. It is up to Venerable Orfan to confront these risks and prove she can vanquish them. If she can break through and become powerful enough to tame the Riot, I am confident that she can become a more powerful presence on the battlefield than Saint Dise. She might not have access to a superdimensional weapon as of yet, but I expect that she can attain such great synergy with the tier 3 Destroyer spear that her lethality will not be much worse."

The First Sword Mark III served as the benchmark for all junior ace mechs with full superdimensional conversion as far as Ves was concerned.

All of the superdimensional ace mechs that he designed after Ketis released her latest pride and joy had to perform better than the now-iconic ace swordsman mech, or else Ves had wasted much of his time.

He knew it would be another challenge for the Venerable Orfan and the Riot Mark III to beat their old rivals, but Ves had given them conditions necessary to make this happen.

It would be disappointing if they ultimately failed to live up to the amazing potential of their combination.

Gloriana held a complex expression as she gazed at the completed mech.

"I hope that you can get what you want from this D-mech. It is the first of its kind, so it would be a shame if it ended up tarnishing your career. The RA will crucify you if the worst comes to pass."

"I think I will be able to manage, Gloriana. The RA is not as closed-minded as the MTA. The Evolution Witch understands my intentions. So long as she is backing me up, I will be fine."

Chapter 7232: Confronting the Demon

Chapter 7232: Confronting the Demon

The fateful time had come.

After converting the Riot Mark III into a D-mech, Ves and Gloriana exited the System Space and brought the machine back into reality.

When Venerable Rosa Orfan finally had an opportunity to glimpse at her destined machine for the first time, she fell completely silent.

Her body remained frozen while she beheld the magnitude of what her battle partner had become.

Nobody who was still present interrupted her. They gave her all the time she needed to process the culmination of the Miracle Couple's work.

The technical specifications of the Riot Mark III were impressive and could easily give the First Sword Mark III a run for her money.

The additional enhancements brought about by the Demoncasting process should have elevated all of her parameters by varying degrees.

It was impossible for the mech designers to estimate how much stronger it had become.

Part of the reason why it was impossible to figure out was because of the odd workings of the Prophecy Imbuement Demoncasting Mold.

Unlike the other molds that Ves had used in the past, this one channeled much of a demon's power into enhancing very specific metaphysical properties of the target object.

This meant that any increases in strength, speed and toughness should be a lot less dramatic.

Ves did not regret this outcome. He never designed the Riot Mark III to function as a physically superior fighting machine. It only needed to be powerful enough to make full use of its more esoteric advantages.

Venerable Rosa Orfan certainly looked amazed. The mech that appeared fundamentally wrong, flawed or broken to most people made a very different impression to the pilot who was meant to make use of it in battle.

"It is... more than what I imagined in my dreams." She eventually broke her silence. "It has a very different feel than before. My battle partner... is gone, isn't he? I have piloted the Mark II for multiple years. I know every detail of him. Even outside of the cockpit, I can still feel where he is and what his mood is. It is similar to my long-standing bonds with Dise and Jannzi. However, this time, I get the unmistakable feeling that I am looking at a stranger who is wearing the skin of my old battle partner."

Ves slowly nodded. "Your senses have not deceived you. When we performed the final process, your old battle partner fought to the death against a much more powerful foreign invader. The latter has won the contest and has claimed much of the former. The Prophet's Bane as we have taken to calling the winner has settled into your new machine. Congratulations, Rosa. The Riot Mark III is officially the first adversarial mech of its kind. It is a machine that exists to test and challenge its own mech pilot. Either you dominate your machine, or it will dominate you in turn."

His words might sound like a nightmare to any normal pilot, especially one of the Larkinson Clan.

The soldiers of the clansmen had been taught to respect, honor and even love their battle partners. Their mechs were alive and possessed the capacity for intelligent thought comparable to humans once they evolved into third order living mechs.

The Larkinson Clan currently had tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of living mechs among their ranks, of which the vast majority had already turned into third order living mechs a long time ago. Each of them had spent months and years interacting with humans.

All of this socialization had caused many new friendships to form between humans and their living machines. This phenomena had practically become embedded into the culture of the Larkinson Clan!

Therefore, what Ves had done to the Riot Mark III most definitely ran counter to this benign development!

Fortunately, Venerable Orfan understood.

"I had hoped that he would be able to accompany me into future battlefields, but... his sacrifice shall not be in vain." She slowly said. "He knew the risks. He decided on his own to undergo a similar test as my own. I do not regret that he lost. He simply did not have what it took to help me become stronger at the pace I want. I hope this Prophet's Bane has absorbed all he needed from my old partner. The more familiar he, or it, has become with his new home, the better. I need my machine running in top form in order to fight the enemies of tomorrow."

Perhaps others might find it callous that Venerable Orfan dismissed the death of a living personality so easily.

The living mech that she had partnered up with for so long had died in a terrible circumstance.

He could have gone on to live for many more years, serving as the indispensable partner and comrade-in-arms of Rosa Orfan.

Alas, it was not to be. The living mech had fallen, and another entity had taken its place.

As Venerable Orfan stared at the dormant D-mech in the distance, the D-mech stared back.

Ves had no doubt that the two were measuring each other up. The Prophet's Bane had grown so powerful and violent that it would never willingly submit to another, especially a human who sought to subjugate it for the purpose of leveraging its power on the battlefield.

Before he allowed Venerable Orfan to interface with her machine for the first time, he gave her a final briefing.

"I have inspected the Carmine System as thoroughly as I could, which is not as impressive as it sounds as the Riot's strange properties makes it difficult to scan its interior. The internal diagnostics all report that the components of the Carmine System are still in order. Whether that data is trustworthy remains to be seen, but I think that the most recent transformation has not fundamentally broken it. The greater concern is whether the Carmine System has become... corrupted. I have tried my best to verify that it is still safe to use, but I cannot give you a 100 percent guarantee. There is a small chance that it may poison you on a biological level. The good news is that I am not too afraid that it will harm your spirit because your extraordinary willpower should be able to resist such influences."

Venerable Orfan did not look too concerned. "When I become an ace pilot, my Saint Kingdom will become powerful enough to reinforce my body and neutralize the dangers of my own machine."

"If, not when." Ves warned her. "Confidence is good, but no outcome is certain. Otherwise we wouldn't be treating this situation so seriously. This is the last window of opportunity for you to reconsider and back out. I know you don't want to think about it, but please take this seriously. Do you agree to participate in this dangerous experiment and serve as the test pilot of the first adversarial mech that I have brought into existence?"

The expert pilot grinned as her fighting spirit only grew stronger after being questioned.

"You don't need to ask any further. I am in. You don't need to feel responsible if I fail. Just like my old battle partner, if the Prophet's Bane has overpowered me, then that just proves that I am not ace pilot material. I would rather end my suffering quickly and die than to linger on for several decades while my progress remains frozen. I am envious, Ves. I am jealous of Tusa, Stark, Dise and Casella for being able to continue growing stronger while I am left out in the cold. This will hopefully change by the end of the day."

She stepped forward.

Ves accompanied her but remained on guard. His wife and Alexa had already activated numerous safeguards and were currently in the process of installing additional restraints.

They had even thought about deliberately sabotaging the mech so that it could not move, but they ultimately decided against it for fear of botching Venerable Orfan's possible breakthrough.

They would just have to put their faith in other safeguards.

As Venerable Orfan stepped close to the machine, both sides remained dormant.

The Prophet's Bane appeared relatively calm, though it was hard to tell what it was doing considering its amorphous nature.

The true contest would only begin once the pilot attempted to interface with the D-mech.

By then, the Demoncasted entity gained a chance to connect with a powerful expert pilot and gain an opportunity to come back to life!

It all hinged on whether Rosa Orfan was able to muster the strength and will to unlock her greater potential.

Ves placed his hand on her shoulder. "Good luck. We have done our jobs. Now it is your turn. I am counting on you to overcome this challenge and gain control of the Riot Mark III. Once you succeed, you shall be assigned to the Bluejay Fleet and fight against the enemies of red humanity. There are a lot of good fights in store. We may have taken on 30 Ascended Giants, but there are enemies that only you can defeat."

Venerable Orfan's heart swelled with hope. "If your mech can help me make the jump, then I will gladly put myself in your service. My spear shall be yours."

She ascended to the entrance of the cockpit.

She already changed into her custom superdimensional alloy piloting suit. It featured special orifices that would allow the suit to form a complete connection with the Carmine System of the Riot Mark III.

Ves and the others retreated to an adjacent control room. They began to man the workstations and began the preparations for the first test.

They first inspected and activated all of the precautionary safety measures. Ves even called over a squad of Ascended Giants who were currently waiting outside in their human forms.

"Check the energy cells. They are at 10 percent charge, right?"

"Correct, sir. No more, no less."

The Riot Mark III did not need to expend as much power in the first activation. If it ever went out of control and managed to overcome all of the safety measures, then it would run out of energy pretty quickly.

There was a chance that Venerable Orfan needed more time to win her contest of dominance against the Prophet's Bane, but if that was the case, then she was not truly ready anyway.

She needed to secure a quick victory. The nearly empty power reserves became another source of pressure to her. If she ended up in a stalemate against the powerful D-mech, then that was as good as failure.

After completing the final checks, Ves and his wife exchanged one more deep glance before focusing on their job.

"Begin."

The Riot Mark III slowly began to activate.

The machine performed the mandatory initial checks, which meant that the first start up process would take a long time to run its course.

Even as the expert spearman mech slowly roused to activity, Venerable Orfan began to hiss as she felt needles poking into her body.

Foreign blood circulated in her bloodstream while her native blood entered the artificial veins of the Carmine System.

Both mech and mech pilot exchanged their blood with each other. This crude ritual exchange started a mystical process that brought the two together on a level that went beyond the material realm.

A sense of weight and gravity descended into the chamber and control room as those present understood that history was being made here. The very first D-mech and adversarial mech was about to put its pilot to the test.

"Mrow."

Blinky emerged out of Ves' head and used his excellent senses to observe the initial contact.

The willpower of Venerable Rosa Orfan did not collide directly against the Prophet's Bane.

Both sides exercised an unusual degree of restraint. Seconds passed in relative stillness as the Riot Mark III continued to test and confirm that all of its components and systems were in order.

It was only when the machine neared the end of its extensive self-checking cycle that the Prophet's Bane finally made its move.

The eyes of the newly completed mech shone in ominous red as the unwilling artifact spirit surged towards its pilot and attempted to destroy her like it had done to many other demons!

"It is starting!"

Chapter 7233: Rosa Orfan's Obsession

Chapter 7233: Rosa Orfan's Obsession

What did it take for mech pilots to break past their limitations?

Nobody could tell the exact parameters. The answer was most certainly deep and multi-faceted. Perhaps it was futile to even explain it with limited human words.

Mech pilots therefore came up with their own answers. None of them sounded perfectly satisfying, but they did the job, more or less.

Some of them claimed that they needed to possess greater guts and courage than 99.9999 percent of their peers in order to trigger their breakthroughs.

Others believed that they needed to excel in terms of skills in order to have a shot of becoming high-ranking mech pilots.

A big group believed that conviction and fighting for the right cause without reservation was the decisive factor.

There was another large group that believed that none of this mattered unless their mechs were better than anyone else's.

Of course, there were also plenty of mech pilots who recognized and understood the importance of all of these criteria.

They recognized that transcending their mortality as mech pilots was an uphill battle that could only be won by a distressingly small group of exemplars who ticked most if not all of the boxes.

The bar was set so high that it was unimaginable for anyone normal to even have a chance.

Perhaps that was the point. Expert pilots were so exceptional in so many areas that only the most extreme and dedicated among the class of mech pilots successfully proved their worth.

Then what about ace pilots?

As the rank that existed between expert pilots and god pilots, the standards of becoming a saint were even more demanding.

This was already enough reasons for many mech pilots to despair. Just becoming an expert pilot was a difficult and demanding endeavor.

Since the Age of Mechs, an endless amount of potentates strove to break past their limits and ascend with the help of their machines.

Yet almost every one of them failed.

Success cases were so rare that they were deemed outliers more than anything.

People like Avatar Commander Melkor Larkinson worked so hard over the years, yet he had never caught up to the likes of his other trueblood cousins such as Venerable Jannzi Larkinson or Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson.

To pilots like him, meeting the conditions to become an expert candidate was already enough to feel like they have satisfied their life's purpose.

It was even more unimaginable for them to achieve sainthood.

Just the very words used to describe ace pilots was enough to understand that only the best and most exemplary among expert pilots had a chance of triggering a second apotheosis.

No expert pilot assumed that becoming an ace pilot was a breeze.

Just because they proved to be best among purely mortal mech pilots did not mean they were entitled to achieve sainthood.

To become a saint was to rank in the top 1 percent or 0.1 percent of all expert pilots.

This was already an insanely tall order because expert pilots were already excellent by definition.

Even if they were not that remarkable as standard mech pilots or expert candidates, the changes wrought by apotheosis never failed to turn mortals into demigods who were worthy to be called this way.

Each expert pilot had transcended the boundaries of the physical universe and gained a small amount of dominion over the divine.

Compared to actual saints, expert pilots were like children who only got to pretend to be a god.

The difference in capabilities between the two was too vast.

It was enough to make most expert pilots that they were not even close to reaching the pinnacle of what they could possibly attain.

Expert pilots were more like upjumped mortals while ace pilots started to grasp the shadow of divinity.

The power of a god was too much to wield by mere mortal humans.

Therefore, Venerable Rosa Orfan had always been fairly clear that she could not rest on her laurels.

Any pride she held for becoming an expert pilot had long disappeared as she continued to struggle with her bottleneck.

To be honest, she recognized that she was not entirely normal with her obsession.

Most expert pilots spent a lot more decades building up their skills and proving their worthiness in battle. They fought alongside other soldiers and participated in conflicts that mattered to their state and the people they protected.

Mech pilots generally understood that engaging in all of these activities brought expert pilots closer and closer to triggering their next apotheosis.

This was how expert pilots normally achieved sainthood. They approached it like a marathon and focused on making consistent gains over a longer period of time.

Patriarch Reginald Cross of the Cross Clan was considered to be an excellent example as he had struggled until he was almost ready to celebrate his 80th birthday before he finally achieved his sainthood!

It seemed ridiculous for Venerable Rosa Orfan to feel disappointed in herself for not being able to do the same thing despite the fact that she was a full generation younger.

The difference was that Rosa knew that her circumstances were much better than normal.

Unlike the vast majority of mech pilots, she happened to be a part of the Larkinson Clan.

The clan offered excellent conditions that were much more conducive to breakthroughs.

For example, the frequency of combat was much higher. The Larkinsons already fought plenty of battles where the survival of their clan or fleet hinged on a decisive engagement.

Living mechs offered better breakthrough conditions than normal. Mech pilots had no way to explain why this was the case, but they pretty much knew that they were lucky to pilot third order living mechs that were intelligent and caring beyond any other machines they used.

Combined with a highly supportive and understanding mech designer and patriarch, those who caught his attention and earned his favor had benefited greatly from his custom works.

The Riot Mark II may be an outdated low-tier expert mech, but it already offered good enough conditions for Venerable Rosa Orfan to ascend into sainthood.

Then why did she fail?

Mech pilots who belonged to the same generation as her such as Venerable Dise managed to make the jump while piloting the equally outdated First Sword Mark II.

The limitations did not appear to have fazed Dise in the slightest. Instead, she took it as another challenge and reveled in her attempts to overcome the physical limitations of her rapidly aging machine!

Rosa had always considered herself to be an equal to Dise.

Sure, they were very different mech pilots with very different backgrounds, but in terms of pure piloting, they belonged to the same generation and shared very similar conditions now that they had both become champions of the Larkinson Clan.

Yet whereas Dise had already taken step closer to earning her godhood and began to pilot the first full superdimensional ace mech, Rosa had remained stuck without any sign of budging.

Her desperation even caused the Riot Mark II to suffer a crippling injury and put herself out of commission for a time, making it even harder to replicate Dise's feat!

While Rosa could barely accept the fact that she was bested by a member of the same generation or slightly older such as Dise or Davia Stark, she was not as willing to accept she was inferior to the members of the younger generations.

She did not know how, but while enjoying the same luxurious conditions in the Larkinson Clan, youngsters such as Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson, Casella Ingvar and Isobel Kotin all managed to undergo their second apotheosis.

Their youth combined with the very short amount of time they spent as ace pilot candidates apparently did not hinder them too much.

While a kid like Tusa could at least attribute much of his breakthrough to piloting the amazing Dark Zephyr Mark III for the first time, what about the likes of Casella and Isobel?

They were still piloting the slightly more modern but still quite weak and outdated Mark I versions of their respective expert mechs!

Their conditions were almost as bad as that as Venerable Dise, but they did not let this inconvenient variable stand in their way of developing their own Saint Kingdoms.

That was what truly put Rosa Orfan in a bad mood.

Being bested by younger and less experienced mech pilots made her feel as if she was simply not good enough.

No matter how much she tried to celebrate her own accomplishment, she felt like a fool whenever she thought about those younger ace pilots.

"You are pathetic, you know that, Rosa? Age is not as important as courage and conviction. There are ace pilots who broke through at an even younger age than Tusa, but also late bloomers who only managed to earn their sainthood in their second century of life."

“I know, Dise. I just can’t help it. I cannot stop myself from comparing my qualifications to that of others.”

The powerful and unshakeable form of Venerable Dise stepped forward in an unrecognizable starry landscape.

She continued to step forward on an invisible platform until she stopped right in front of Rosa.

The postures of the two couldn’t be more different.

The actual ace pilot’s spine remained straight while her eyes conveyed her formidable amount of willpower.

Just a single glance was enough for Rosa to feel suppressed!

Her intuition told her that she was in the presence of a higher and much more superior life form.

Rosa felt as if she was a fraud in front of her close friend.

Dise had successfully taken the next step like an indomitable swordswoman while Rosa stumbled like a drunken pig.

She lowered her head.

Her shame grew when she still considered herself to be a friend of Dise.

Just like how demigods no longer interacted with mortals all that much, saints had become so transcendently powerful that it was beyond awkward for them to continue to interact with the former on a frequent basis.

There was a natural hierarchy between the two. Both of them possessed excellent intuitions, so they were quite clear of the vast gulf in strength between their groups.

As much as Rosa hated it, there was no way to sustain the same relationship across a major gap in rank.

The only exception may be the Saint Commander, but that was mostly because Casella had become the Larkinson Matriarch, thereby forcing her to interact with mortals in order to lead the clan.

Other than that, ace pilots tended to spend time in their own circle. If they had to talk to their lessers, then there was always a sense of hierarchy.

Saint Dise crossed her arms as she continued to gaze at Rosa with her judgemental gaze.

The force of her Saint Kingdom and her conviction made it clear that she despised weakness in herself and others.

“I have told you before that your obsession with comparing yourself to others will be your doom.” The ace pilot stated. “Age is not as important as you think. So what if younger pilots such as Tusa

and Isobel managed to become my peers? They deserve it. They worked hard and performed well on the battlefield. Their skills are excellent and their convictions are sincere enough. More importantly, they are not prone to feeling inferior to anyone. Only you are engaged in constant comparisons with your betters. Do you know what this says about you, Rosa?”

“No.”

“Your behavior indicates that you are affected by a deep sense of insecurity. You fundamentally lack confidence in yourself. Just because you are not the first ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan, you immediately assume that you are trash. You have tried hard to get rid of this assumption, but your lack of progress has made that impossible, for you directly equate your worth to your rank. Since when has becoming an expert pilot shameful? You are still a hero and champion to the Larkinsons.”

“It doesn’t matter!” Rosa cried out! “I am no hero! fraud! The main reason I got here is because I freeloaded off the Larkinsons! I admit it, okay! My strength did not have much to do with how I managed to become a high-tier expert pilot in a matter of years. It is because the Larkinsons supplied me with a living expert mech and let me ingest all of those general cultivation elixirs!”

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Chapter 7234: The Trial of Worthiness

Chapter 7234: The Trial of Worthiness

The stars winked in the background.

For as long as humans existed as a race, they often yearned to ascend to the stars.

During more primitive times, they believed that the stars were gods or the residents of gods. They ascribed all sorts of myths to them, believing that their deities existed on a completely different plane of existence from themselves.

Such beliefs may have faded nowadays, but people’s yearning to become greater than themselves has never disappeared.

Mech pilots possessed an especially powerful desire to attain power and greatness because there were ready-made examples of those who succeeded.

From the ancient and fiery First Flame to the impossibly perfect Chosen Human, there were around a 100 known god pilots who had successfully passed every test and survived every threat to their life before ascending to the ultimate height.

Knowing that each mech pilot possessed the seed of godhood made people like Rosa Orfan feel special.

It also placed a heap of expectations on their shoulders.

Every mech pilot was expected to put serious effort into attaining their godhood.

Those who fell out of the race early and accepted cushy positions on peaceful planets earned their fair share of contempt.

When all they had to do was to make their mechs look intimidating and respond to occasional policing action, such mech pilots had firmly chosen to cling to their mortal lives rather than chase after transcendence.

Mech pilots who chose to accept more serious jobs and assignments earned a lot more respect.

The dangers they braved as they fought on behalf of their people tempered them and tested whether they were worthy to take step closer to becoming a god.

Venerable Orfan had taken the first step, yet now that she was trying to take the second step, her doubts continued to nip at her heels.

Saint Dise seemed to grow in stature as she continued to stand tall over Venerable Orfan.

The two had once been close comrades in arms. They still maintained their correspondence throughout their service to the Larkinson Clan, but it was undeniable that once Dise had taken a crucial step forward, she had already become a woman who stood apart from the rest.

Only a very small gathering of ace pilots earned the right to become her peers.

Rosa hated that. She hated that she was not a part of that exclusive gathering. She hated that she was being left behind as if she was a failing academy student who needed to repeat another year.

In fact, as far as she was concerned, she had already been held back by a year.

Perhaps that was not a big deal in the greater scheme of things, but what if this situation persisted?

What if she made noticeable progress in the next year, and the year after that? How much longer could she tolerate this humiliation before she was willing to admit that she was not worthy to advance any further?

“Look at you, Rosa. You are an ace pilot candidate. Your resonance strength had long reached the level where breaking through is possible. Becoming an ace pilot has become a matter of will and serendipity for the most part. You cannot control the latter, but the former is entirely based on you. Right now, you are failing. You are failing badly.”

Rosa scowled. “Do you think I do not know that?! I am doing my best to remain confident in myself, but these doubts of mine never go away! It is in my nature! I always question myself whether I am

good enough! Each time I try to come to this conclusion, a comparison with a more successful pilot always leads me to an awful conclusion.”

“Have you ever thought about not comparing yourself to me or anyone else?” Dise asked as she crossed her arms and tapped her foot on an invisible surface. “You are the only person who is doubting your ability. The rest of us are much more optimistic about your chances. Ves himself has already prepared your new assignment once you have broken through and taken control over the Riot Mark III. Is that not a mark of confidence from your greatest patron? Why not believe in his judgment instead of your own? You do not know yourself as you think.”

The expert pilot under trial understood her friend’s arguments, but she simply could not bring herself to agree with those words.

“Dise... I told you already. This is who I am. A day never goes by without comparing myself to another. Back when I was a kid, I compared myself to my classmates back in the Bright Republic where I grew up. When I became a teenager, I eagerly competed against my fellow cadets, proving myself to be above average but still far from reaching the top. As a mech officer of the Mech Corps, I did not know what I did right or wrong for me to get assigned to the Flagrant Vandals.”

“Out of the mech pilots of the Flagrant Vandals, you are by far the most successful one to come out of your original mech regiment.” Dise argued.

“That is not a real accomplishment and you know it. I do not really consider myself a Vandal anymore. Maybe I was afraid I would remain associated with the rest of them who have never shown any greater potential.”

“That just validates my point. You are special, Rosa. Other Vandals have failed to become as powerful as you. This is a cause for celebration, not a reason to feel ashamed.”

Yet that was exactly what Rosa Orfan did. Shame always accompanied her doubts. She still felt inferior for one reason or another.

Questions about her fitness and worthiness continued to gnaw at her being. Her thoughts spiraled in such a dark place that her current form began to morph.

“Look at the price for doubting yourself.” Dise gestured with her hand. “Look at your body and see how you are proving yourself as the weaker of two enemies.”

Rosa lowered her gaze and saw that her lower left leg began to get engulfed in a strange dark mist.

It started small, but slowly began to creep up. Rosa felt as if she was starting to lose any feeling and control over the parts of herself that became corrupted.

A vague sense of alarm welled up in the core of her being. She instinctively figured out that this sight was not a meaningless illusion. The jolt was sharp enough to inject a measure of lucidity in her consciousness.

She was undergoing a trial. She had no idea what was happening in reality, but for the time being her consciousness was stuck in this mysterious space.

Her current manifestation likely represented her soul, willpower or a mix between the two.

Whatever the case, its condition directly reflected her health and condition.

This meant that any maladies that affected her manifestation affected the rest of her as well.

The dark mist was gaining ground. Anything it touched became gray and started to get affected by strange phenomena that made the affected parts of her body less... consistent.

She was slowly transforming into a freak, one millimeter at a time.

While she felt alarmed at this development, what could she do to halt its advance?

The answers were not that difficult to find. She needed to muster up more confidence. The more she believed in herself, the more she would be able to resist this outside invasion.

Yet while other peak expert pilots found it simple to believe in themselves, Rosa Orfan continued to face the same mental blocks as before.

Her doubts had become as permanent and solidified as her bottlenecks. They may have even merged with each other.

Without getting rid of her bottlenecks, how could she gather enough confidence to earn her sainthood?

“You disappoint me, Rosa. I had long assumed that you would serve as a strong and reliable spear for the Larkinson Clan. As uncouth as you may be, you and your Riot have remained steadfast guardians of our people. Many of them have reason to thank you for your service, but this may not remain the case forever.”

Rosa Orfan frowned as he saw that Dise had quietly disappeared.

Jannzi had taken the ace pilot's place.

“You have no right to judge me, Jannzi. You are still an expert pilot like myself.”

“I am younger than you. I believe that entitles me to lecture you. Your doubts are continuing to lead you astray. While you waste your time on questioning your own worth, younger expert pilots such as myself and others are making progress in their own ways. Already, the next generation of Larkinson champions are growing rapidly. They can participate in all the fights they want while they are serving with the expeditionary fleet. It has also become easier for them to redeem helpful elixirs from the War Exchange. As pricey as they may be, their effects are worth it as it can allow the brats who have not yet even reached their thirties to catch up with our resonance strength.”

Rosa felt shocked for a moment!

“What did you say? Are there people in their twenties among our latest cohort of expert pilots?”

“You better believe it, Rosa.” Jannzi still maintained her stern and judgmental expression. “It will take a few more years and a custom high-tier expert mech designed by Ves and Gloriana for them to catch up to Saint Dise, but it will happen sooner or later. Their qualifications are much greater than yours and their valor on the battlefield is not any less.”

The information that a bunch of brats that were young enough to be her children started to catch up to her rank with the possibility of surpassing it impacted her badly.

Her mental balance became so disturbed that the dark mist had managed to creep up all the way to her waist!

The corruption started to spread towards her torso and other legs.

She felt she was losing more and more parts of herself.

As Rosa twisted her manifested body, she found to her surprise that the darkened parts did not obey her commands, but did not remain entirely still either.

The darkened foot began to lift and descend as if stepping on a pedal.

The knee experimentally shifted the lower leg back and forth, forcing her other leg to compensate lest she lose her balance.

Horror slowly welled up inside Rosa Orfan as she realized that the corrupted portion of her manifested body had fallen under the control of a different existence!

Rosa was unable to gain much of an impression of this other entity. The corruption spreading throughout his body did not trip her intuition or made her feel a threat to her life.

Perhaps that was the scariest part about this process. The corruption was silent and subtle. As long as Rosa Orfan lowered her guard for any reason, its spread accelerated.

It did not take an intellectual powerhouse for her to conclude that she could never let the corruption spread to her head and convert her entirely.

“I... must prove myself worthy...”

She had no idea how she could push back against this wave of corruption, but the best way she could think up was to follow her original plan and trigger her second apotheosis.

All of her doubts would be seared away by her explosion in strength.

No demonic corruption could taint her inviolable soul as her Saint Kingdom completely took charge of her personal protection.

“Prove yourself worthy?” Jannzi asked in a slightly incredulous tone. “You are doing the opposite of that, Rosa. I am growing more and more disappointed in you, my old friend. My own breakthrough is not far from coming. I have made my own gains while piloting the Bastion on the battlefield. So what if the dated tech and construction of our machines is holding us back? Confidence is all you

need to overcome these handicaps. The fact that you are still not able to make the push despite being handed over the most powerful junior ace mech is... disappointing.”

Rosa continued to lower her head in shame.

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Chapter 7235: Concerning Signs

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The control room remained mostly silent.

The only significant noise that people inside could hear was the low hum of machinery.

In fact, the instruments of the Tarrasque were so advanced that it was trivially easy to keep them silent.

However, such behavior often unnerved humans. It also made it harder to know whether they were active or dormant.

For psychological and utility reasons, most larger devices and machines of significance tended to generate at least a modest amount of noise if only to signal their active states.

The hum of machinery remained the only noise heard by Ves and the other occupants.

This was not supposed to be the case. The workstations should at least release beeps or alert noises, but they remained silent as they had been unable to detect any obvious abnormalities.

Gloriana frowned more and more until she finally had enough.

“Are the readings false? Is the Prophet’s Bane feeding us false data?”

She had good reasons to voice her suspicions.

For one, the Riot Mark III remained completely still during its activation.

Its systems came online in order and passed all of the diagnostics without any major concerns.

This attracted Gloriana’s suspicion as the data looked way too normal given that the Riot Mark III had turned into a D-mech.

Even if its demonic mutations were much less obvious than before, they were still present. The physical form of the Riot Mark III constantly fluctuated as if slightly alternate versions of the same machine rapidly switched places with the original machine for a few milliseconds before making room for other versions.

The bizarre changes were not illusionary. The slightly altered forms of the Riot Mark III were completely real and physical as far as Ves and Gloriana could ascertain from the outside.

Since the Riot Mark III was in flux from a physical perspective, the data reading should have reflected its physical inconsistencies.

This did not happen for the most part. A lot of the telemetry of the mech looked suspiciously normal. It was as if the machine was truly standing in place.

Even the data supplied by the Carmine System attracted suspicion.

“What is the Carmine System doing?”

“On a physical level, it is operating normally.” Ves said in a half-believing voice. “Venerable Orfan has shown no sign of rejecting the artificial blood being pumped through her veins. The Carmine System has not been corrupted to a noticeable degree. All of its core and auxiliary functions are working as intended. Regardless of my suspicions, I see no reason to believe the Carmine System has failed on a biological level. What I am more concerned about is how the spiritual side is faring. From what I can tell, Venerable Rosa orphan has already formed a stable Blood Pact with the Riot Mark III. They formed the connection remarkably quickly. I am surprised that there is hardly any delay.”

“...That sounds even more suspicious.” Gloriana said. “If your words are correct, does this mean that the Prophet’s Bane actively embraced the Blood Pact?”

Ves inclined his head. “I believe so. It did not resist the new pilot, but tried to be as accommodating as possible. The Prophet’s Bane may not be as mindless and irrational as we thought. It is much scarier for it to show foresight and effectively rein in its short-term impulses. I fear that it has already sprung a trap as soon as it formed the widest possible channel with the pilot. The Middle Demon stands to take over Venerable Orfan’s body with much greater speed and effectiveness if it makes use of both the neural interface and the Carmine System at the same time.”

“What is the pilot’s condition?”

“That is more difficult to ascertain.” Ves said with a frown as he continued to study the data related to Venerable Orfan’s physiology. “Her body remains healthy and unaffected. Her brain is much more active, so she is definitely doing a lot of thinking, but none of that is reflecting back onto the mech itself. The Riot Mark III has not received a single command from its pilot.”

That meant that the two were locked in a dialogue or conflict that took place on a level that Ves and the instruments could never breach at their current tech level.

That left Ves with no other recourse than to monitor the Riot Mark III using Blinky’s precise senses.

The problem was that the Riot's own chaotic nature worked against him. The D-mech's enhancements specifically guarded against any form of examination, whether conventional or spiritual.

Blinky would at least have to get much closer and maybe even dive inside the machine in order to ascertain its condition.

This was not a good idea because Rosa Orfan's willpower would definitely repel any intruder as violently as possible.

Despite the absence of clues, Ves could nonetheless surmise that she was not in a good position right now. This was her test which she willingly subjected herself to. It was not appropriate for him to disturb her and break her concentration during a critical moment of her life.

"What is your guess? You must have formed your own ideas about the current state of your D-mech." Gloriana pointedly asked.

She was right. Ves did not always need hard proof in order to form his own conclusions. Their reliability may be in question, but he was right more often than not. His expertise was so diverse and scattered that he was able to make crazy inferences that hardly any other mech designer could equal.

Ves took a moment to compose his words. Though he had a definite guess in mind, he needed to frame his response carefully to avoid misinterpretations.

"I think that Venerable Orfan is in deep trouble. Like really deep." He said. "When we presented the completed D-mech to her, we already knew that it is inhabited by a much more powerful and unquestionably hostile 'artifact spirit'. The best way for her to overcome this challenge is to trigger her second apotheosis right away. I was hoping that she would become so exuberant about piloting a new machine that she could become an ace pilot before the demon could pounce, but it appears that this scenario has not come to pass."

"So Venerable Orfan lacks the strength to dominate the demon."

Ves nodded. "It appears so. I think that she should normally be able to put up a good fight, but even under the best of circumstances, it is unlikely for her to be able to fend off an aggressive Middle Demon that has not only been strengthened multiple times, but also devoured the old living mech and became the sole spiritual master of the Riot Mark III. This is Rosa Orfan's true test. If she wants to prevent the demon from devouring her and claiming her body for itself, then she needs to step up and fight back harder than she has ever done before."

"And you think she is not doing that at the moment?"

"We would have detected more positive signs if that was the case. An absence of unusual signals implies that the Prophet's Bane has gained the upper hand."

"Can we not do anything for Venerable Orfan, then? Can you summon one of your design spirits to help her out, or forcibly shut down our mech?"

“While there are no signs that Venerable Orfan is aware or in control of the machine, she is still interfaced with the Riot Mark III. She is passively resonating with the mech. While that does not mean a proper resonance shield has formed, the expert mech will automatically repulse all unnatural intrusions. The only way to get past this universal repulsion effect is to bring someone she trusts well enough to make an exception.”

His wife immediately understood that they did not have such a thing at hand.

“A pity. Siblings and direct family relationships have proven to be the only relationship types that are strong enough to make high-ranking mech pilots lower their guard against each other. Rosa Orfan is not a Gemini, and she does not have a sibling relationship as close as the one between Casella Ingvar and Imon Ingvar.”

The Gemini Family and the Ingvar siblings had proved that high-ranking mech pilots did not always have to exclude everyone aside from themselves.

It was fascinating to witness champions who normally became strong due to possessing endless confidence in themselves readily form a reliance on the individuals they cared about the most.

Imon was so obsessed with her sister that he freely allowed her willpower to affect him. This was an exceptionally rare phenomena that Ves had never really seen outside of the aforementioned cases.

In short, Ves knew that there was no easy way for him to intervene. He knew that when he completed the Riot Mark III and disclosed the risk factors to the expert pilot.

“She is on her own.” He concluded. “While we have installed a temporary killswitch into the mech, do you really think the Prophet’s Bane will let us forcibly turn off the power reactor? We will have to physically penetrate the Riot Mark III’s Chaos Armor and disable the power reactor in order to interrupt whatever is going on. Even then, we may end up causing permanent harm to Venerable Orfan due to interrupting a process that should not have been stopped so suddenly.”

Gloriana’s expression grew severe. “A substantial amount of time has already passed without any indication that she has gained control over her dangerous machine. I am increasingly more certain that she will perish or completely lose her qualifications to fight if this pattern persists. Is it not better to preserve what little we can salvage from her than to let her die?”

He shook his head. “The outcome is not yet set in stone. I believe in her. High-ranking mech pilots are famed for snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. The probability of a breakthrough rises when her sense of crisis grows higher. This is why she has insisted to me that we must not intervene. She does not want the lingering expectation that we will come and bail her out to weaken her resolve and give her the impression that she can rely on others for rescue. For better or worse, we should do as she has asked. Do not forget that she has acknowledged the risks and does not hold others responsible for a possible failure.”

He still hoped that she would pull through somehow, but the odds of that happening started to diminish.

Over time, Ves was able to sense subtle changes to the machine.

Rosa Orfan's willpower began to weaken over time.

The deterioration happened slowly at first, but began to accelerate in pace.

Even Gloriana and Alexa managed to detect this very concerning change as the resonance meters measured the reduction in true resonance with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

"The resonance meters are all returning consistent results." Alexa Streon said. "The Riot Mark III's true resonance has dropped below 50 laveres. According to historical statistical studies, the probability of a breakthrough at 50 laveres is at least 2 orders of magnitude lower than the probability of the same happening at 60 laveres. If the decline in true resonance continues at its current pace, it will take less than a minute for Venerable Orfan to drop below the minimum resonance strength that is known to trigger a successful second apotheosis."

Ves frowned. What was happening to Venerable Orfan that caused her will to fight to weaken to such a dramatic degree?

"She can still make it through." He said with faltering hope. "Expert pilots can be highly inconsistent. They can be incredibly depressed in one moment, and incredibly motivated the next moment. Let us remain patient and wish her luck."

"..."

His wife was not as optimistic as him. She was already thinking about who was responsible for organizing Rosa Orfan's funeral arrangements.

More importantly, she also thought about how she could escape culpability for developing a mech that directly led to the death of its own pilot.

It should be easy to shove most of the blame to her husband since he was the source of all of this craziness, but she still held a bit of responsibility for enabling his antics and not doing enough to discourage his wild ideas.

She was not about to let her husband ruin her career!

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Chapter 7236: The Disappointment of the Larkinson Clan

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Venerable Rosa Orfan stood silent as she rewatched all of the battles of her career.

From the time she served in the Mech Corps of the Bright Republic to the period where she fought against the native aliens in the Red War, each of her strengths and weaknesses laid bare before her eyes.

Making difficult decisions during the heat of the moment in the middle of a busy battlefield was very different from watching your own performance from old footage.

Rosa hated it. She hated the sight of how she piloted the Riot and the previous mechs she used over the course of her career.

It was impossible for her to ignore all of the flaws and shortcomings of her actions. As a high-tier expert pilot with plenty of experience under her belt, she knew what good piloting looked like.

She only had to watch Saint Dise fight with the First Sword Mark III to understand what she could become if she applied her skills better.

Unfortunately, Rosa was way too far from reaching her friend and former peer's abilities.

The gap was so great that Rosa grew more and more ashamed as she witnessed her horrendous performance.

No matter what stage of her career she was in, there was always plenty to criticize.

She shouldn't have engaged that opponent.

She should have paid more attention to the plight of her comrades.

She should have performed a different attack during a specific sequence.

There were many situations where she could have defeated more opponents and won the battle if she just made the right decisions.

To see how many opportunities she missed and how she was so fixated on what was right in front of her that she missed more important developments elsewhere damaged her self-esteem even further.

She had no way of denying these mistakes. Her judgment as a professional mech pilot could not be fooled to this degree. Much of her actions and decisions were objectively bad, especially now that she was able to compare them to each other.

A profound sense of shame spread throughout her being. To see her flail about without knowing any better was just too humiliating.

She remembered most of the battles well enough to know that they were not fake in any way. Rosa may have been younger and much less skilled at the time, but even then she had enough piloting and command ability back then to make much better choices.

Venerable Orfan did not necessarily feel ashamed for making all of those mistakes per se. She was disappointed in herself, but her faults were not irredeemable.

The problem was that she kept making them. She recognized that she had a number of bad assets that she had never seriously addressed. The fact that half of them were problems in the first place did not even register in her mind.

So what if she favored aggression over caution?

So what if she was a little too willing to take risks and let her machine take the brunt of the damage?

So what if she did not bother to listen to the requests and proposals of the mech pilots around her machine?

Back when she still felt as if she was on top of the universe, these flaws seemed trivial to her at the time.

It was only now that she was forced to look at her reflection in the mirror that she could no longer deny what was obvious to any serious mech pilot.

Venerable Rosa Orfan was a neglectful fighter.

She recognized that she had a bad case of tunnel vision, but never thought it was wrong because she was so consumed by her own apparent strength.

This was why she hated to review her own performance. She could not help but recognize her own faults and acknowledge the truth of her own flaws.

“This is the real Rosa Orfan.” Saint Dise spoke as she continued to pass judgment over her friend. “I have advised you time and time again that reviewing your own actions after a deployment is a valuable learning opportunity. You cannot improve if you do not diagnose your shortcomings. Your refusal to look at your mistakes has left you in an ignorant state where you keep repeating them over and over.”

She made a good point.

Rosa hated it that her friend pointed out the truth.

To see herself fumble around right from the start of her career and continue to make similar mistakes like a blind pig made her feel embarrassed beyond reason.

She no longer felt she was worthy to be an expert pilot, let alone becoming an ace pilot.

No ace pilot would fight in such a shameful manner!

“The difference between us is that your confidence is based on your ego, while mine is based on the skills and techniques that I have diligently trained almost every day.” Saint Dise continued to rub in her superiority. “You have wasted much of your time on unproductive activities. To your credit,

you are not lazy, but your training is largely ineffective due to your refusal to diagnose your own problems and formulate deliberate plans to address them. Without a targeted and cohesive training plan, you mindlessly make marginal improvements in the skills you are already good at while neglecting the aspects of yourself that require more attention.”

Rosa Orfan lowered her head even further.

She felt like such a failure.

She could not bring herself to deny Dise’s painfully accurate criticism.

How could Rosa ever think she deserved to become a saint?

Ace pilots were supposed to be the best of all expert pilots.

Her performance made it clear that she did not rank close to the top 1 percent, let alone top 0.1 percent.

There were easily hundreds if not thousands more high-tier expert pilots in the entire new frontier who possessed superior qualifications than herself!

Unlike a blind and ignorant pig like herself, these diligent and disciplined expert pilots maintained a strict and targeted training regime that was much closer to the one practiced by Dise back when she was an expert pilot as well.

These champions did not rest on their laurels like Rosa Orfan, but recognized the vast gulf between their current ranks and the next one. They were not afraid to review their old battle footage and frankly admit their own shortcomings.

Only by honestly confronting and recognizing their own faults were they able to mitigate them in the most effective manner!

As Rosa Orfan recognized how unworthy she was, she practically lost control of both of her legs.

The black corruption had completely taken over her lower body and was starting to capture her arms as well.

This left her immobile and feeling as if she was increasingly losing essential parts of herself.

It became a little more difficult to maintain her awareness. She faintly detected that her willpower was waning, but she had no idea how to stall this deterioration.

Her willpower was based on confidence.

How could she possibly feel confident in her abilities when she recognized that she was the expert pilot equivalent of a clown all this time?

Sure, her performance on the battlefield was not bad by any means, but she had been wasting so much of her potential due to the fact that she had never trained as diligently as others.

Even Venerable Vincent Ricklin took his boxing training more seriously than her own spearmanship drills!

“You have let down the expectations of the Larkinson Clan.” A new and younger female voice uttered. “The clan has graciously provided you with some of the best mechs that we could develop for you. We spent valuable resources to support you as our champion, yet by squandering much of your growth opportunities, you have turned into a sad excuse of a high-tier expert pilot. All of those general cultivation elixirs that we stuffed down your throat could have been used to prep a more deserving champion for greatness. If your current state is the extent of your martial prowess during these trying times, then you have let down our clan.”

Rosa Orfan wanted to issue a retort, but she could not think of any decent argument to defend herself.

She had transgressed. She had wasted too much resources. She did not feel worthy to pilot a mech as fine as the Riot Mark III.

Venerable Jannzi Larkinson sneered as she directed her judgmental glare straight at the sad sack that thought she deserved to become an ace pilot.

“You do not deserve any of our sympathy and pity. Aside from being overly generous, our clan has not erred in our treatment of you. We only misjudged your worth and thought you would be a worthy candidate for the second full superdimensional mech of our clan. Do you understand how much the former patriarch and his wife have invested in your high-tech machine? There is more super-class materials and exotic tech stuffed into the archemec frame than you can imagine. I wouldn’t expect an illiterate brute like you to understand the specifics, but even you should understand how rare it is to make a mech out of armor-grade superdimensional matter.”

The latest super material to take red humanity by storm deserved all of the hype.

A armor-grade superdimensional matter was rare beyond belief, yet the Larkinson Clan was still willing to invest heaps of it into her Riot Mark III.

The Larkinsons shouldn’t have done so. Rosa Orfan did not deserve to pilot such an absurdly strong mech. Other mech pilots such as Saint Tusa and Venerable Jannzi deserved to make use of a high-grade superdimensional mech much more.

“What do you even bring to the table, Rosa?” Jannzi asked with her constant sneer. “Are you a killer of phase whales like Dise? Are you an indomitable shield and protector like Jannzi? Or are you a hyperfast scout and skirmisher like Tusa?”

“I am... none of them...” Rosa admitted.

“Exactly. You are nothing. You used to pilot a spearman mech that is weaker in offense than the First Sword, less durable than the Bastion and much slower than the Dark Zephyr. Perhaps the Riot Mark III is able to overturn most of this, but you do not deserve all of these gains. You are able to make much less use of them than the mech pilots that I have mentioned. Dise can turn every weapon into an instrument of slaughter. Jannzi can make a mech lasts twice as long as yours. Tusa can evade many more attacks than you. What about you? What is your advantage?”

“ ... ”

Jannzi snorted. “Thought so. This is the gap between you and the rest of us. You not only neglected your training, but did not think to develop an advantage that is not yet covered by others. You are a master of none. You possess no unique killer moves and have no famous deeds to your name. You are the most dispensable high-ranking expert pilot of our clan. At least Casella is mourning Imon’s loss. No one will seriously mourn for you when you inevitably perish.”

Rosa felt her heart being pierced by the words of her friends.

The truth in them rang so loud that they deafened her ears.

How could she be so blind to her failings?

She did not deserve to become an ace pilot.

A saint was the best of all of the expert pilots. Rosa Orfan was way too far from matching this ideal.

As the expert pilot continued to mentally beat herself up, the dark fog continued to overtake more and more of her body.

Her lower torso began to get corrupted while her arms became completely engulfed.

Much of her form began to lose definition as a different presence began to surge inside her manifestation.

She was changing by the second.

This should have alarmed her, but for whatever reason Rosa accepted it as if it was her penance.

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Chapter 7237: The Unmaking

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A small part of Venerable Rosa Orfan recognized that she was dying.

Darkness and disorder had taken over much of her body.

Her limbs had fallen entirely to the strange miasma that defied her understanding.

Her torso had largely fallen to its way, with only her heart and part of her lungs still remaining in pristine condition.

Her head also remained her own. As the center of her mind and will, she was better able to resist the advance of darkness.

Helping to resist the encroaching darkness was her companion spirit, yet this addition only delayed the encroaching tide.

How long could she fend off the invasion?

She had already lost a lot of strength. Her willpower continued to deflate while her resolve weakened with every passing second.

Her fighting spirit grew dull while the fire in her heart threatened to snuff out entirely.

She was not doing a good job of serving as a model for all mech pilots at the moment.

An expert pilot was not just a warrior. He or she was meant to serve as a symbol and a source of inspiration. Each of them exemplified the possibility that every mech pilot possessed a seed of greatness in themselves.

For an expert pilot like herself to falter and become consumed by her own doubts was an intolerable flaw.

Though Rosa Orfan still possessed enough of a willingness to live that she was able to stem the foreign invasion that had taken over much of her manifestation, her resistance continued to weaken.

Perhaps the only reason why her will and personality had not fractured entirely at this time was because the invader had slowed its pace in order to digest the parts of herself more thoroughly.

Memories started to fade. It became increasingly harder to maintain what scrap of awareness that was left. She knew that she was being unmade, starting from her most vulnerable portions of herself.

She should be fighting back against this encroachment. She should have defied the attempt to take over everything that made her Rosa Orfan and repel the invader. A true expert pilot would push back no matter the price and fight for any chance of survival, no matter how fleeting!

Rosa Orfan understood all of that, yet could not gather the motivation to resist.

It was as if this part of herself had gotten devoured first. She was unraveling with every passing second. Her humanity had turned into a buffet which the foreign invader devoured at a slow but inexorable pace.

“Yes. Continue to wallow in your weaknesses and your failings. You disgust me. As soon as I have completed my absorption of everything that belongs to you, I shall take your place and become the sole and undisputable master of the Riot Mark III. Not even the mech designers of this weapon of war shall deprive me from claiming this superdimensional mech.”

Rosa raised her head just enough to see that Saint Dise and Venerable Jannzi had disappeared.

They no longer voiced their criticism and disappointment at Venerable Orfan. They had stopped caring for the woman they once regarded as a close friend and comrade. They couldn't be bothered to waste their time on her. She was a lost cause to them as far as they were concerned.

That only left one more individual to describe her failings.

Herself.

The mirror version of Rosa Orfan possessed a completely different demeanor.

It, or she, looked like her, but in a less definable way. Her body and expression were difficult to observe because they were subjected to a slightly familiar interference effect.

That made it a lot harder to read their meanings and intentions. This shrouded version of herself did reveal enough of her face to understand that she was grinning in a gleeful manner.

"You are weak and unqualified to pilot the Riot Mark III." The alternative Rosa spoke with sadistic undertones. "Your first at interfacing with the mech is a catastrophe. You completely lack the strength and mental fortitude to tame this machine. How pathetic. The Riot Mark iII is made for you. Despite the irregularities that occurred, you should still have been able to take control over it. Instead, your negative progress condemns you. It is clear that you are not ace pilot material."

"..."

The real Rosa Orfan slowly narrowed her eyes. She knew that she had to feel an intense emotion at this time, but she could not come up with the idea of what she had exactly lost.

That only made the false Rosa Orfan more gleeful. "You have done your duty, if only barely. Your career is over, and so is your life. Let me take over in your stead. I am stronger, more confident and will never make the mistakes that have dragged your heels. Let me be your successor. You no longer deserve to live anymore. Embrace your death so that your body and your willpower can be used for greater purposes."

The foggy miasma continued to devour the real Orfan's torso, even beginning to penetrate into the heart.

However, since her manifestation was not a real physical body, the heart did not play an especially great role.

What truly mattered was her head or more specifically her brain.

This was the true remaining bastion of her personality, her life and her existence.

Rosa truly thought about handing it all over to this invader who had taken on a distorted version of her visage.

What was the point of further resistance?

She had recognized that she was unworthy to become an ace pilot.

Her grand attempt to corner herself into breaking through was a plan made out of hubris from the very start.

She lacked the strength and conviction to earn her way to sainthood. If her confidence crumbled so easily after a single round of self-reflection, then what was the point of resisting any further?

At least this invader would be able to do a better job. Whether the conqueror of her own strength and body would be willing to pledge her loyalty to the Larkinson Clan was not her problem anymore.

She couldn't bring herself to care about the Larkinsons. Perhaps she never really cared about them in the first place. She had few friends among them. Her relationships with her closest peers had weakened due to distance and other reasons. She wouldn't be missed. She was certain of that. She was too worthless to make anyone shed a tear for her passing.

"I..." The real Rosa Orfan opened her mouth for what may be the last time. "I... give up. You win. You can have it all. I hope that you can do more with what I have than a loser like myself."

Tears leaked from her manifested eyes, yet Rosa Orfan did not understand why she was shedding them in the first place.

Perhaps a fading part of herself recognized the gravity of her decision, but what little that she had left could not process such emotions anymore.

She felt nothing. Her capacity to feel emotions had mostly unraveled while her thoughts grew increasingly more foggy.

Soon, all of her thoughts and emotions would fade entirely. That would be the moment her existence passed on entirely.

As the manifestation of Rosa Orfan continued to succumb to the invader, the false version of herself saw no need to speak any further.

The intruder had already grasped the fruits of her victory.

As the tide of corruption threatened to devour the last scraps of light that was left of the original Rosa Orfan, it suddenly ceased.

This was not due to mercy on the invader's end.

Rosa Orfan also did not manage to regain enough lucidity to put up a sudden resistance.

Instead, the final wave of conquest and subversion crashed against a barrier that thrummed with the power of space.

A third party had intervened.

This should not be possible.

As pathetic and weak as Rosa Orfan had become, a third party shouldn't have been able to barge in and intervene in this power struggle.

What was happening?

The third party did not keep both sides waiting for long. The new presence emerged from the most core parts of Rosa Orfan's remaining soul.

A small manifestation of Qilanxo had arrived.

The reptilian creature turned design spirit had detected Venerable Orfan's dire state, and forcefully intervened to save the woman that she had bonded with many years ago on the surface of a forgotten planet from the old galaxy!

The small manifestation of Qilanxo did not just project a barrier to halt the invader's progress.

The design spirit also turned to whatever was left of the real Rosa Orfan and encouraged her to fight back and survive!

The false Rosa Orfan sneered at the last-second intervention of a design spirit. "Begone, creature. You are not welcome here. This wretch is not worth your attention. She is a weak and pathetic failure of an expert pilot. I will do better than her. I won't even need your protection anymore. As soon as I find the anchor of your connection to her, I shall relish the act of severing it. The mere fact that it still exists is another mark of failure. Expert pilots must rely on themselves to surpass their limitations. They can lean on design spirits such as you in order to save them from their own failings. Begone!"

Qilanxo's alien eyes glared at the false Rosa Orfan with animosity.

"What are you looking at, you beast?" The apparent invader taunted the design spirit. "Do not think you can bluff me into surrendering. Your connection with Rosa is limited. You can only channel so much of your strength. Even now, your barrier is weakening by the second. I will have my prize sooner or later. Even if you combine your feeble power with this failure of an expert pilot, it is far too late for you to launch a counterattack. My conquest is inevitable."

The design spirit could not refute the truth of this hostile entity's words. She was indeed unable to bring more than a tiny fraction of her full might to bear. Just establishing this connection under the current circumstances was already arduous enough.

Yet Qilanxo never thought to rely on brute force. She disregarded the false woman and addressed the real Rosa Orfan.

The design spirit never communicated by verbalizing human words. She preferred to communicate in a more direct fashion by passing on entire ideas and impressions.

Though it was difficult for the real Rosa to interpret Qilanxo's message, the method of information transmission made it a lot easier for her to understand the design spirit's revelations.

According to Qilanxo, Rosa Orfan was not weak. She was strong.

“I... am not... weak.”

So what if she was not as skilled as Saint Dise? Every pilot had their own strengths. Mediocre skill was not the end of the universe for them. Ace pilots had other ways to excel in combat. Strong enthusiasm and guts could often compensate for careful planning and execution!

“I am not... worthless.”

Venerable Rosa Orfan mattered to the Larkinsons. She had fought to defend the clan when it was still weak and vulnerable. Her contributions to the early battles played a decisive role in letting it grow to a much greater height.

Even now, her importance was still significant, as she could still protect a lot of clansmen as an expert pilot and carried the possibility of becoming an even greater guardian.

“You... are not the intruder.”

Qilanxo divulged the truth. The multi-century old beast may not be as strong or full of knowledge like some of the other design spirits, but she had her own strengths.

The facade created by the false Rosa Orfan did not fool the beast for a second.

Now that the design spirit pointed it out, the real Rosa Orfan or what was left of her suddenly felt as if a fog had lifted from her eyes.

She suddenly realized the actual truth.

Venerable Orfan thought that the hostile ghost who appeared and took on the guise of Dise, Jannzi and a different version of herself was the demon that she set out to conquer.

Yet that was not the case at all. The truth was so much different from what she imagined.

The demon did not invade her soul directly. Instead, according to Qilanxo, the Prophet's Bane had somehow tampered with a small part of her soul before sitting back and waiting for it to develop into a new and corrupted version of herself!

In other words, Rosa Orfan had actually been arguing with herself all this time!

A spark of anger ignited in the parts of her soul that remained untouched.

This spark rapidly turned into a blaze as Rosa suddenly managed to regain the ability to experience intense fury.

“You.... BASTARD!”

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Chapter 7238: The Real Demon

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Ves continued to stare at the Riot Mark III with no clue what was going on inside.

This was one of the few rare moments where he regretted that he had done too good of a job.

No matter whether it was the Chaos Armor, the gem he had integrated into the original version of the Riot a long time ago or the special capabilities of the Prophet's Bane, the D-mech still managed to resist his probes.

Ves did not trust the telemetry transmitted by the machine. The scanners of the workshop could not overcome the chaotic interference produced by the Chaos Armor. Blinky's excellent spiritual senses still could not take a peak of what was taking place inside either.

It was as if he had accidentally turned the Riot Mark III into a demonic gu container.

From the moment Venerable Orfan entered the cockpit and interfaced with the D-mech for the first time, a death match commenced where out of the two occupants, only one was destined to triumph.

Ves felt a lot more concerned about the outcome of this particular competition. It was easy for him to throw a bunch of souls and demons into a gu container and let them sort out the winner by themselves. The demise of any one of them did not matter to him as he did not have a strong attachment to any particular life.

Not even the Prophet's Bane was indispensable to him. If another demon managed to defeat the remnant taken from the Doom of Remis gem, then the victor should at least have been able to assimilate a part of what made the loser special.

This scenario never happened. The Prophet's Bane had entered every brutal free-for-all with an advantage and came out of the Demon Mixers as the sole survivor several times in a row.

There was no way that such a demonic entity was weak. Not even the willpower suppression of an expert pilot could hold it back for long.

The only way out for Venerable Rosa Orfan was to advance to the rank of ace pilot.

This was why Ves found it increasingly harder to cling to hope. He needed to be realistic. The more time passed without any visible breakthrough manifestations, the greater the probability that Venerable Orfan succumbed to her D-mech.

“Ves...”

“Patience.” He said. “We have not detected any positive or negative reactions so far. I can only assume that the two are still in conflict. I do not want to disturb it in any way. Let it play out. Who knows if Rosa Orfan is able to make a surprise comeback. I promised to her that I would not ruin her moment. She sounded very insistent that she did not want us to intervene and forcibly pull her out of the cockpit.”

“It has been more than half an hour, Ves.” Gloriana reminded her husband. “This is an excessive amount of time as far as first activations are concerned. I will wait for another 30 minutes. If Venerable Orfan has not shown any sign that she has gained control over the Riot Mark III, then I will call in the mechers and have them intervene. We are operating in their warship, after all. Perhaps they can be of assistance.”

Ves frowned, but he did not reject her suggestion out of hand. Perhaps it may be better to call in outside help if it became more and more obvious that the situation has gone out of control.

As he wondered what the hell was going on inside the Riot Mark III, he remained unaware that Venerable Rosa Orfan had suddenly managed to halt her seemingly inexorable decline.

In fact, she did more than stop her descent.

As realization settled in, Rosa grew furious at how she had almost gotten hoodwinked into killing herself!

Although she still did not know what exactly was going on with this weird space, she instinctively understood that this was part of a test of sorts.

A test that she had been losing badly before Qilanxo emerged and woke her up to the truth.

“It is too late.” The false Rosa grinned as she taunted the victim. “I was born from your feelings of inferiority. You birthed me to become the superior version of yourself. Look at your current state. So what if you got a reminder? Almost all of your soul has surrendered to me. I have claimed so much of you that there is very little that you have left to take back what you have lost. I only need to complete my final push in order to claim everything.”

The real Rosa Orfan gritted her teeth. “You... are... wrong. I am... not gone yet. There is still... enough of me left to take back everything that belongs to me. Besides, you are a bad liar. You are not the better version of me. You are the spawn of the demon. My willpower is still my own. You have done nothing to earn it! As long as there is still a small part of me left, you can forget about taking over my will!”

Her false mirror laughed in response!

“Hahaha! Do you really think you have a chance now that you have regained your bravado? It does not work that way. Willpower alone is not a weapon. It only truly becomes powerful when you can combine it with your soul. Now that I have taken over much of it, there is too little ground for you to make a comeback.”

“Oh really?”

With the help of her willpower, the real Venerable Orfan started to regain the ground she lost!

This became visible as the corruption that had engulfed her entire soul manifestation started to recede starting from the neck area.

The resistance was much harder than she expected. The false version of herself might not be able to leverage any willpower, but she controlled so much of the soul that it was difficult for the real version of herself to make good progress.

An added challenge to this competition was that she could not afford to be too careless and destroy any part of her soul. Rosa needed to work delicately enough to purify the corruption, which was much harder than it sounded.

Yet as long as she was able to make any progress, she had hope of regaining what originally belonged to herself.

Her confidence grew. Each part of her soul that came back to her allowed her to leverage her willpower more effectively. This would not only speed up her progress, but prevent her false self from making a comeback!

“Get... out... of... my... head!” She roared as she gradually recaptured her upper torso and her shoulders.

This sped up the real Venerable Orfan’s reclamation speed by multiple times. Her confidence soared as her advantage continued to snowball.

However, despite being on the losing end this time, the illusion that represented the false version of herself still did not drop her smirk!

“You could have given up painlessly, you know. Going out on a whimper is the fate that a loser and a failure like you deserved. Since you chose to put up a fight to the end, I have no choice but to make this a lot more painful for the both of us. Do you know that even though you have formed a Blood Pact, the demon has largely maintained his distance?”

“Huh?”

The false Rosa Orfan smirked wider. “I tried to do this the quiet way. I managed to take over most of your soul without making you feel as if you were under attack. That is because I am still a version of yourself. The reason why the demon kept its distance was to avoid alerting you in advance. Your willpower initially overlooked my presence, but the same wouldn’t happen if the demon arrived in advance. Not only would your resistance at the start be a lot stronger, but the ensuing struggle would also cause large parts of your soul to tear into pieces.”

The real Rosa Orfan suddenly widened her eyes. She might not be the smartest expert pilot around, but she was not stupid. She readily figured out what this evil version of herself was trying to say!

Before she knew it, the false Rosa Orfan completely opened herself up to the Prophet’s Bane!

The foul demon eagerly took advantage of the opening and slipped right in through the Blood Pact!

This caused the illusion of the false Rosa Orfan to mutate and acquire a handful of random demonic traits!

“The real fight has begun!”

The illusion had disappeared. The sudden intrusion of the demon had a devastating effect on Rosa Orfan’s soul.

Not only did the Prophet’s Bane take over and devour the false version of herself, but it also leveraged its considerable strength into taking over the rest of the soul!

“Ahh!”

The real Rosa Orfan faced much more resistance than before!

She had yet to regain enough lost ground to gain the upper hand in this confrontation.

In fact, even if she was still in control over her soul, the expert pilot doubted that she would be able to hold back the demon for long.

The Prophet’s Bane was too powerful!

While his energy encountered a lot of difficulties in overcoming her extraordinary willpower, the demon had much greater reserves than she could imagine!

At this moment, Venerable Orfan could feel the demon pushing her back to the point where she was losing control over her shoulders and upper torso.

This further put the demon at an advantage.

As the Prophet’s Bane rapidly assimilated the corrupted portions of her soul, it rapidly established its foundation within the Riot Mark III and its future human meat puppet.

Now that the Prophet’s Bane had directly occupied large parts of her soul, Venerable Orfan was able to understand the demon a lot better.

“It is too much!”

There were hardly any barriers between the two.

Due to the false Rosa Orfan’s complete surrender, the Prophet’s Bane had been very successful in assimilating much but not everything that belonged to the former.

The demon knew everything about her memories, thoughts, emotions and so on. This knowledge allowed the malevolent being to quickly fortify its occupation of Rosa Orfan’s soul and strengthen its offensive!

At the same time, Rosa Orfan also gained a large understanding of the demon.

Much of it was incomprehensible to her, but she quickly figured out how bad it would be if the Middle Demon completely took her soul!

Nothing of her would be left!

Even her body would turn into a vessel to propagate the demon's hatred and overwhelming desire to spread chaos!

"Ahhhh!"

As Rosa Orfan desperately tried to leverage her willpower to slow down the enemy advance, she began to experience greater pain than before!

Unlike the false version of herself, the Prophet's Bane did not care about minimizing damage and was all too willing to inflict damage in lieu of surrender.

What was even worse was that Rosa could faintly feel that her body was in pain!

She had no idea what was going on, but her intuition told her that the Riot Mark III was seriously harming her body somehow!

This two-pronged assault against her soul and body quickly drove the expert pilot into a corner.

As the Middle Demon swept past her neck and began to take over her lower jaw, Venerable Orfan knew that she had run out of time!

The false version of herself had been right.

Bravado alone was not enough for her to resist the powerful demon that had already taken over most of her soul!

Venerable Orfan already knew that this grave invasion had marked her in a way that could not be reversed anymore.

Something fundamental had been broken or warped by the demonic invasion.

The longer the Middle Demon took root, the less that the expert pilot would be able to salvage this mess!

Despite her dire condition, Venerable Orfan paradoxically felt more alive than ever.

Being driven to the point where a demon was literally gnawing at her soul had forced her to not only confront her many failures and shortcomings, but also use these truths as the basis of her conviction!

"I... am... not... WEAK!"

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Chapter 7239: Rosa Orfan's Conviction

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Confronting the truth hurt.

When the false version of herself used the images of herself and other Larkinsons to put Rosa Orfan down, each point of criticism was grounded in truth.

The impact they had on her mood and confidence had been severe enough to push the expert pilot to the brink of giving up her life and existence.

This was how much she cared and how badly she was affected by her own failings!

Yet Rosa also realized that there was far more to life and fighting than fixating on her weaknesses.

All of those failings represented just one side of the coin. She refused to believe that she was able to become an expert pilot and make it up to this point without having her redeeming factors.

At this critical situation, she knew what she had to do in order to remove the final obstacles to breaking her bottleneck.

She had already completed the first step by honestly acknowledging her weaknesses.

However, the next steps mattered even more. What were her strengths?

"I am not the strongest, toughest or fastest pilot, but I can be good enough in all three! I am the one of the most well-rounded champions of the Larkinson Clan after Joshua!"

Venerable Orfan offered versatility. She was able to fight against a wider variety of opponents and only really had trouble with enemies that remained at a distance.

As long as she was able to get close enough, she could rely on the Riot's defenses to withstand accurate attacks, and make use of its mobility if the enemy preferred more hard-hitting strikes.

Combined with her not so trivial offensive power, the expert pilot had always taken pride in being able to scrap and duel against many powerful opponents.

Yet this was not a proper description of her strengths as an expert pilot.

What was her greatest advantage? Every high-ranking mech pilot was unique.

"My greatest strength... is my persistence! I will never give up! I will always keep fighting!"

Though Rosa very clearly ignored her previous state, she believed with all of her heart that she was the gutsiest of all of the champions of the Larkinson Clan!

Compared to Venerable Jannzi who constantly had to think about how to block or mitigate incoming attacks. She might even have to make the difficult call to retreat in order to prevent her Bastion from crumbling apart entirely.

Venerable Orfan in contrast did not put nearly as much thinking into her actions.

She had often received complaints and criticisms regarding her irreverent behavior, but as far as she was concerned, she was making a positive difference.

She responded to potential threats faster than her peers and was not afraid of engaging in a disadvantageous matchup.

No matter how powerful the enemy may be, as long as she could make a difference, her honor demanded that she try her best!

The value of this mindset could not be overstated. In a war where heroes and gods became increasingly scarier and more lethal, possessing the guts to confront the alien monstrosities without reserve was exactly what many mech forces needed!

This realization also gave Venerable Orfan enough clarity when it came to her conviction.

She discovered that unlike many of her fellow peers, she did not possess a strong calling for protecting human civilization or the Larkinson Clan.

It would be false to claim that she cared as much about the Larkinson Clan as Dise and Jannzi.

Try as she might, she simply couldn't bring herself to match their patriotism and dedication.

That was okay.

Venerable Orfan was her own person. She no longer felt the need to maintain a pretense of being just as loyal as the other champions anymore. There was room for many people in the Larkinson Clan.

So long as she maintained her obligations to the Larkinsons and met her contractual obligations, she would still remain useful to the clan.

That was enough.

The truth was that Venerable Orfan cared a lot more about herself. She admitted it. She was selfish and self-centered. She still cared about the people around her, but her incessant need to prove herself and keep up with the best of the Larkinson Clan was a reflection of how much she obsessed over herself.

She wanted to become strong. Not in order to rule over red humanity or reshape the Red Ocean in her image.

No, her goals were not so grandiose.

She simply wanted to become the strongest.

Yes, really.

It sounded like such a simple and juvenile goal, but perhaps not everything about Rosa Orfan had grown up.

Perhaps the only addition he could make to that goal was to have fun while doing it. She had spent too many days wallowing in her feelings of inferiority. Those were not good times. Rosa Orfan became resolved to face the future with a more optimistic mindset!

If she was weak, then she needed to push herself harder!

So long as she did not give up on herself, she would always be able to close the gap between herself and her ultimate goal!

This led her to formulate her true conviction for the first time.

“The careers of many mech pilots are beset by accidents and opportunities. It is difficult for us to survive all of the crap that the universe throws at us. Those who rise above the occasion are not always the prodigies or the blessed ones. Sometimes, a lucky bastard like me gets to earn her place among the greats. I will do everything in my power to become a god pilot no matter what is wrong with me. Everything! I will even make a pact with a demon if that is what it takes to come out on top! I FEAR NOTHING!”

Before the demon could press its attack and rely on its demonic strength to devour what remained of Rosa Orfan’s willpower, the Prophet’s Bane was suddenly taken aback when an explosion of willpower originated from what little Rosa Orfan retained!

“I THRIVE IN CHAOS!”

Venerable Rosa Orfan was no more.

Saint Rosa Orfan had come and taken her place!

As the former expert pilot finally triggered her long-awaited second apotheosis, a mutation immediately occurred!

Due to the mechanics of the Blood Pact as well as Rosa’s far-reaching state of demonic possession, the barriers between the two began to blur!

Both the Prophet’s Bane and Rosa Orfan found that they had lost control over themselves and became subject to the vagaries of the powerful breakthrough process!

Nobody could ever imagine that an expert pilot would be crazy enough to break through while most of her soul had already been devoured and partially assimilated by a potent Middle Demon.

This resulted in an unprecedented situation that the Progenitors of Mechs had never foreseen or planned against.

Despite the anomalies, the second apotheosis event was such a violent and overbearing process that it forcibly executed its steps without making any special adaptations in reaction to the new and unexpected variables.

As Rosa Orfan's extraordinary willpower exploded in both quantity and quantity, it also began to merge with her original soul as well as the parts of herself that had already been occupied by the Prophet's Bane!

The latter suffered a lot more than the former!

Due to how much the Middle Demon had conquered just before the breakthrough moment, it was being subjected to much more changes.

The problem was that the demon was not a mech pilot and was not compatible with the changes wrought by the second apotheosis event!

Only the parts of himself that he inherited from Venerable Orfan responded best to the current situation.

Much of what originally defined the Prophet's Bane melted and got repurposed. The powerful transformation process did not care what the Middle Demon was supposed to be.

The birth of a new saint was set in stone. The transformation could not be stopped.

It took everything the Prophet's Bane had to preserve his core identity and do his best to hastily adapt to the changes.

It had already suffered a lot when it was forcibly Demoncasted into a very different form inside the Riot Mark III.

Now, the Prophet's Bane found himself unlucky yet again when the second apotheosis event forced him to contort into another shape!

It was all too much for the Middle Demon. He was mad to begin with, but he grew absolutely insane after being forcibly remolded to support Rosa's rapidly growing willpower!

The soul of Rosa Orfan practically turned into a cauldron. Fueled and stirred by the energies released upon a second apotheosis, the delineation between the two became a lot weaker as they got mixed up by all of the profound changes!

Both the Prophet's Bane and Rosa Orfan instinctively understood that they were merging into a single being!

Naturally, neither of them wanted this to happen, so they tacitly agreed to stop fighting against each other in order to do their best to preserve their identities and sense of self as much as possible!

Try as they might, the domineering breakthrough event repeatedly tried to break their resistance in a single-minded determination to follow a rigid set of instructions.

“I... will... not... let... chaos... erase... my... existence!”

While Rosa relied on her ballooning willpower to cling to the pieces that belonged to her, the Prophet’s Bane relied on its own demonic powers and its foothold inside the Riot Mark III to navigate the storm.

Neither of them knew what would become of them, but they knew that they had to go all-out in order to make it out alive!

From the outside, the breakthrough event was obvious.

After so many minutes had passed without anything happening, all of the observing mech designers became shocked when it finally happened!

The resonance meters beeped in alarm as they measured the birth of forced resonance that immediately exceeded the limit of an expert pilot!

“70 laveres! 80 laveres! 90 laveres!” Alexa called out in shock! “The numbers keep rising! Rosa Orfan is finally undergoing her second apotheosis!”

Gloriana meanwhile stared at the machine beyond the transparent screens.

“What-what is happening to our mech?!”

Ves pulled his attention away from the telemetry and observed the Riot Mark III.

Under its restraints, the exterior of the mech rippled as if it was a surface of a lake. Superdimensional archemetal shook and deformed as if an invisible god was squeezing it from all sides.

Though the Riot Mark III quickly bounced back into shape, it was still a disturbing sight!

As Rosa Orfan’s breakthrough continued, the expert mech slowly began to generate a Saint Kingdom.

While it started off weak, Ves could also sense a hint of threat from its expansion.

It lacked control!

Rosa Orfan’s condition must not be good for her to lose control over her own domain field.

This put the Tarrasque under threat!

The vessel immediately initiated an emergency lockdown to safeguard her many systems!

“Eject!” Gloriana immediately called! “Don’t teleport away the Riot. Just toss it into space! We can worry about the rest!”

She made the right call. Ves could no longer care about protecting confidentiality as the Riot Mark III turned into a danger that was too powerful to suppress.

When Rosa Orfan earned her sainthood, she was supposed to use her willpower to get everything under control!

Ves never thought that she would be able to become so strong, yet still remain unable to control her own power!

Both Ves and Gloriana activated the same ejection command.

The deck below the center of the workshop turned into a gap. The machine immediately sank into it after being pushed by the gravitic instruments of the warship.

Seconds later, an emergency hatch blew open and ejected the brand-new superdimensional archemec into open space!

The Bluejay Fleet had already implemented countermeasures to obscure long-ranged observation, but none of these methods were perfect.

The energy signature of the Riot Mark III affected by forced resonance was too strong to block through these measures!

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Chapter 7240: Horrendous Consequences

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“Rosa! Rosa! Can you receive this transmission?! Answer me! What is your current status?! The telemetry from your mech is all over the place! We don’t know what is taking place inside the Riot Mark III. Please tell us whether you are alright!”

Saint Rosa Orfan’s breakthrough was anything but standard.

The mech did not make any move, yet its exterior kept rippling and morphing as if it was on the verge of triggering a massive physical evolution.

Yet there was another powerful force or multiple forces that prevented the machine from succumbing to madness.

A breakthrough from expert pilot to ace pilot should never generate so many concerns.

Expert pilots already possessed excellent control over their machines.

Their boundless confidence fueled their extraordinary willpower, which granted them excellent mastery over themselves and their mechs.

Becoming an ace pilot strengthened these traits beyond all previous limits. A saint was regarded as a pilot who managed to rise far above mortals because they were able to leverage the power of mechs much greater than others.

To witness a breakthrough event unfolding where the Riot Mark III not only refused to make a single move, but also appeared on the verge of triggering uncontrolled mutations meant that something was terribly amiss!

Was it the D-mech? Had the Prophet's Bane thrown a spanner in the works? Or had the demon successfully devoured Rosa Orfan and broken through in her stead?

All of these answers may be possible. Ves briefly shifted to the data that was supposed to report the state of the Riot Mark III's energy reserves.

They were fluctuating. They claimed that the Riot Mark III possessed a 5 percent charge in one second, and 17 percent in the other. The numbers kept rising and falling as if the mech suffered from a thousand glitches.

While it was easy to dismiss these chaotic readings as junk data that did not reflect the actual state of the Riot Mark III, what if this was not the case?

What if... Rosa Orfan's Saint Kingdom was able to bend reality to the point where it could actually recharge the Riot Mark III's energy cells?

This was a level of reality distortion that Ves had never witnessed from a junior ace mech, but this was not a normal breakthrough!

With the addition of a powerful Middle Demon, who knew how much stronger Saint Orfan's breakthrough had become!

Not only that, but forced resonance was different from true resonance.

Whereas the latter was always the product of control and synergy, the former was produced by an excess of powerful energies!

This was normally good as it enabled an expert mech to briefly wield the power of an ace mech in advance, but that was not the case this time!

The latest ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan was undergoing a distorted breakthrough. Her willpower may not reflect her actual conviction. Certain extreme emotions may have overpowered her more temperate ones. This temporarily turned her into an exceedingly powerful threat!

The Bluejay Fleet was on guard. The 30 Ascended Giants were already prepared to launch into space and work together to subdue the Riot Mark III in case it went out of control.

While the superdimensional mech was specifically designed to counter phase lords among other enemy types, it was unlikely to suppress so many human phase lords at once, especially if the latter was equipped with a handful of superdimensional gear and employed proper teamwork!

Besides, Ves had deliberately kept the tier 3 Destroyer spear away from the Riot Mark III to limit how much damage the expert spearman mech could do by itself.

While the Riot Mark III could technically penetrate spatial barriers and easily punch holes through phase lord raiments by relying on its full superdimensional archemech frame alone, it was not able to physically overpower so many Ascended Giants when they all held onto its limbs!

The question now was whether the Riot Mark III was about to go on a rampage and whether it received the maximum possible resonance empowerment from the newly expanded Saint Kingdom.

“Do we need to deploy, sir?” The Divine Spear asked as he had inflated to combat size and donned his raiment.

The strategos did not care whether he was speaking to Ves or the Dark Apostle.

“No. Please stand by.” Ves responded. “I think the appearance of so many Ascended Giants may provoke the Riot Mark III into lashing out. Remain out of sight. Let this event play out. I believe that Rosa would never allow her machine to harm her comrades.”

Seconds passed by as many more people observed the Riot Mark III without comprehending what was taking place.

Red humanity gained a new ace pilot. This was a cause for celebration, yet more and more people grew concerned whether Rosa Orfan measured up to the standards of Saint Tusa and Saint Dise.

The Riot Mark III did not make any triumphant actions.

It did not blaze in glory and exaltation.

It simply hovered silently in space while its new Saint Kingdom uncomfortably settled over its rippling mech frame.

Slowly but surely, the upheaval died down.

The anomalous fluctuations dropped in intensity while the Saint Kingdom grew weaker but more stable.

Ves had the sense that after a lot of exertions, Saint Orfan may have finally seized control at the cost of expending herself.

Soon enough, the Saint Kingdom winked out while the Riot Mark III steadily powered down.

“Rosa! Please respond! What is your condition?! Do you need rescue!?”

The dormant mech remained completely unresponsive. After a brief delay, both Ves and Gloriana ordered a retrieval crew to tow the dormant expert mech back to the Tarrasque.

They did so carefully while performing as many scans on the machine as possible.

“The Riot has changed.” Ves stated when the machine had finally been returned to the shielded workshop. “The Prophet’s Bane... is in a weird condition.”

“How so, Ves?”

“I cannot... describe it. I have a strong feeling that we can obtain all of the answers so long as we open the cockpit and examine Saint Orfan’s condition.”

“Is she okay?”

“I don’t know. I do not believe she has died, but... she was definitely affected by unknown complications. We can only take a look to be certain.”

After a bit of hesitation, Ves chose to enter the workshop to open the cockpit of the new machine himself.

Gloriana and Alexa stayed behind in the control room for safety reasons.

As Ves flew closer, he could feel more and more that the Riot Mark III possessed a different feel than before.

It was as if he was confronted by a mech that had been broken down and remade, but still maintained the same appearance as before.

The cockpit of a high-ranking mech was not that easy to open from the outside. It was bad design to give enemies an opportunity to make use of this backdoor to strike directly at the mech pilot!

However, search and rescue teams still needed a way to get inside if anything happened that demanded immediate retrieval.

This was especially important for a superdimensional mech that was nearly impossible to breach through mundane means!

Given that a D-mech posed a much greater threat to its mech pilot than ordinary machines, Ves believed it was best to implement this safety measure!

Of course, Ves had made sure to make the emergency unlocking process as convoluted and difficult to manipulate by enemies as possible.

He had to waste more time than necessary and leverage the strength and control of a phase lord in order to finally get the hatch to open.

Just as Ves was about to dive inside the cockpit and remove an unconscious and unresponsive ace pilot from her seat, he froze in astonishment.

“What is it, Ves?! What are you seeing? Why are you not pulling out our new ace pilot?” Gloriana questioned her husband. “Your body is in the way of our external optical sensors. Step aside and let us see!”

Ves looked confused, but did what he was told.

As his body moved away, enough of an opening appeared for Gloriana and Alexa to view the interior of the cockpit at an angle.

While the perspective was not the best, the sensors were still able to observe the dreadful state of Rosa Orfan.

Both female mech designers grew speechless.

“Am I seeing this correctly? Is this real, or an illusion?”

“It is... real, Gloriana.” Ves slowly answered. “I can tell that it is real.”

“Her body... how...”

“We still know too little about D-mechs and the Carmine System. We especially do not know anything concrete about what happens when we combine the two. Now we know what might happen.”

Ves and the others grew increasingly more horrified when a new reality stared in their faces.

As if to rule out any possibility that this was an illusion, Ves cautiously entered the cockpit and reached out to touch Rosa Orfan’s nearly inanimate body with a gloved hand.

He touched her flesh, which had largely grown dark and gray as if her body had undergone a demonic transformation that failed to complete.

He touched the surface of her helmet. The superdimensional hard materials had partially melted and deformed to the point where bits of metal and composite materials had merged into the flesh and bone of Rosa Orfan’s skull!

He touched the parts of her body and piloting suit that ordinarily pressed back against the surface of the piloting chair.

All of it had been fused together. The boundaries between the three has seemingly faded, causing them to blend to the point where Rosa Orfan's body had partially sunk into her own chair!

This was a horrendous sight that would have killed any other person!

Yet Ves confirmed with his own eyes and senses that the new ace pilot was not only alive, but in a stable condition.

She was incredibly exhausted, and her new Blood Pact with the Riot Mark III was unusually strong and active, but Ves confirmed that the worst case scenario had not come to pass!

So long as Rosa Orfan was still alive, then there was still hope for recovery!

However, Ves immediately guessed that it was not so simple to separate man from machine this time.

The biomechanical components of the Carmine System had merged so deeply into her body that separating one from the other had become a nightmare of a challenge!

The piloting chair was the interface of the Carmine System, so when Rosa Orfan's body integrated into the object, harming one would harm the other!

They could not dismantle the piloting chair for fear of threatening the health of Rosa Orfan's mortal coil!

"I think... we have no choice but to call in the mechers." Gloriana said. "This is beyond our capacity to solve."

"You... are right. Please inform Vector Loban. He needs to take a look at this himself."

Ves continued to remain in place as the mechers finally received permission to step inside and examine the latest and most abnormal masterwork mech produced by the Miracle Couple up to this point.

The pair had developed plenty of weird machines, but the Riot Mark III definitely broke a new record!

Gloriana was getting a new masterwork certificate after all. The only uncertainty was whether she would also receive a summons to present herself before a tribunal composed of Master Mech Designers.

"Well, you have certainly strayed far beyond the boundaries of mech design." Vector concluded. "I wouldn't worry too much about the repercussions. Everything can still be explained away so long as the pilot lives and the mech remains functional. If the new ace pilot wakes up and declines to file a complaint, then we can still sweep this unpleasantness under the rug."

"I see. Thank you for your help."

“The Transhumanist Faction has already gained much analyzing this anomalous machine. We value novel data, and your Riot Mark III has defied normality in every way. We can significantly advance our understanding of mechs by analyzing this precious data.”

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Chapter 7241: Transhumanist Miracle

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At this point, Ves no longer cared too much about letting the mechers crawl all over his new D-mech.

While he still refused to provide any answers related to Demoncasting, the experts of the Red Association were not stupid. They could fill in a lot of the blanks without requiring any verbal explanations.

Ves could only sigh and accept this consequence as the price of a partially botched breakthrough event.

He continued to ponder about what exactly went wrong.

This anomalous outcome shouldn’t have happened. Saint Rosa Orfan should have broken through directly, broken through late or died without ever fulfilling her dream.

From what Ves could gather from all of the clues, Saint Rosa triggered her second apotheosis awfully late.

In fact, the most likely theory that could explain why she botched her breakthrough was that she had triggered it when she was on the verge of losing herself forever.

She had lost much of herself to the Prophet’s Bane. The two had become so entangled with each other that it became difficult to treat them as separate entities.

If that was the case, then much of the anomalies that occurred during the abnormal breakthrough event could be explained.

Ves awaited the feedback from the members of the Transhumanist Faction.

Out of all of the factions of the RA, the Transhumanists should be the most accepting of what has happened.

Their expertise also happened to be highly relevant to the current case.

After several hours of examinations and consulting with research groups over highly encrypted communication channels, Professor Vector Loban finally returned to Ves and Gloriana in order to disclose their preliminary findings.

Despite their exhaustion and desire to recharge their mental faculties, the Miracle Couple could not bring themselves to call it a day when they had produced an unprecedented accident.

They needed answers. Ves and Gloriana needed to know that despite what had occurred, they had not condemned the new ace pilot to a life of suffering, mutilation and isolation.

Seeing the optimistic expression on Vector's face already provided a lot of reassurance.

The Transhumanist liaison wouldn't smile if the worst case scenario had occurred.

"First of all, congratulations for earning your latest masterwork certificates." Vector announced to the pair. "The issuance of the certificates will be much delayed this time. Our faction will try to rush it as quickly as possible, but the sheer amount of anomalies that we have ascertained during our initial examination will make that difficult. I do not expect that these objections will hold out for long given our strong support and the fact that you are a tier 2 galactic citizen. Despite everything that happened, the Riot Mark III is still a masterwork mech. What others consider imperfections, we prefer to view it as a noble experiment to promote the evolution of the human race. We cannot condemn a sincere attempt to break the status quo."

His words fit the goals and ideology of the Transhumanist Faction. Ves grew a little more reassured when he heard that the Transhumanists were willing to expend political capital in order to back him up and sweep any potential problems under the rug.

"Will there be any follow-up investigations?" Gloriana cautiously asked.

"That cannot be avoided." Vector admitted. "The Riot Mark III is an unprecedented fusion of man and machine, mech design and cultivation science, superdimensionality and spirituality. Your machine intersects so many advanced technologies and theories together that it is a crime against humanity to leave it unstudied. We have already applied to assign a permanent multi-disciplinary research team to monitor its condition and track its changes over time. We will also include medical professionals who are primarily tasked with keeping your new saint's mental and physical state as healthy as possible."

That was the price for receiving the backing of the Transhumanist Faction. Ves did not even bother to argue this arrangement. He knew that he and his clan simply did not possess the tech or expertise to take proper care of Saint Orfan.

His wife did not have a problem with this deal either. She was grateful that the mechers finally stepped in and accepted the responsibility of taking care of the ace pilot.

At this point, Gloriana cared little about the Riot. Ves had twisted it so much that her sense of ownership in the expert mech had plunged. The D-mech carried so much of his fingerprints that they had almost entirely overlapped her own touch.

“About Saint Orfan...”

“Her condition is complex, but relatively stable as far as we can ascertain.” Vector responded to Gloriana. “We do not expect that her life is in danger in the short term. We are not so certain whether that will remain the case in the medium and long term. We have already determined that we cannot separate her body from the piloting chair that she has partially fused with. Doing so will lead to grave consequences for both the physical and metaphysical health of the pilot.”

Vector activated a projection that showed a highly detailed wireframe model of the cockpit.

He highlighted the piloting chair that still contained Rosa Orfan’s body.

The results of the latest deep scans provided an inside look of what was happening beneath the exterior.

Both Ves and Gloriana’s expressions grew grave when they observed how intricate the fusion between flesh and machine had become.

The piloting chair might look like a chair, but it was actually a highly sophisticated machine that contained part of both the neural interface and the Carmine System.

It also contained a lot of systems designed to cushion the pilot’s body against extreme forces and protect it against shrapnel and other hazards.

“As you can see, there is no neat and simple line that separates the body of Rosa Orfan from the structure of her piloting chair.” Vector patiently explained. “The components that serve many different functions such as projecting an azure energy shield, inertial dampening, wireless neural interfacing and conducting the blood exchange function for the Carmine System have melded into her body. Each of these components have undergone strange mutations that have not only made them compatible to Saint Orfan’s human body, but also integrated it into the mech to the point where it is no longer a discrete existence anymore.”

“That means...?”

“From a purely functional perspective, Rosa Orfan’s body has turned into an extension of the mech. It has become as deeply integrated as the Carmine System itself. To sever the body from the mech is like removing an essential system from the Riot. A mech will no longer work if we remove the power reactor or the engine from the machine. We believe that a similar circumstance is at work here. It may not seem obvious, but we calculate that there is a 85 percent probability that the Riot Mark III will become completely inoperable and Saint Orfan will likely perish upon trying to sever the two by force.”

Gloriana took this news especially hard. She considered the current situation to be a huge failure on her part. A mech was meant to serve the pilot. It was not designed to devour its user!

“How do you know?” She skeptically asked. “Why is your confidence level so high? You only studied our machine for a handful of hours.”

The Transhumanist mech designer grinned in response. “That is because we have conducted many experiments over the centuries that have produced... similar results. Ah, do not misunderstand us.

The similarities are not strong. We have never conducted an experiment involving novel elements such as superdimensional alloys, archetech and the Carmine System, but the combination of all of them has produced an outcome that has provided us with a vast amount of data and inspiration. By comparing new results with old results, we can deduce many insights and increase our understanding of what it takes to further the evolution of humans through mechs.”

Ves had spoken with Transhumanists enough times to become aware that they conducted a large amount of taboo experiments. The more radical members of their faction was perhaps the most eager to overthrow all of the overly restrictive rules that restricted their research.

The Great Severing had conveniently cut the RA Transhumanist Faction off from the oppressive Chosen Human.

Now that they had embraced the leadership of the much more tolerant and forward-minded Evolution Witch, they became much more open about conducting experiments that previously would have brought them to trial!

The Transhumanists were so obsessed about their grand ambitions that they did not even bother to hide their past transgressions anymore. Ves could only imagine what kind of sick experiments they conducted in the past that resulted in humans becoming permanently stuck to their mechs.

“In the instances that have resulted in an undesirable and suboptimal integration between man and machine, forcibly severing the corpus of the mech pilot from the physical structure of the mech has resulted in death or functional death 100 percent of the time.” Vector seriously said.

That revelation caused alarm to both Ves and Gloriana.

If the figure was accurate, then there was not a single success case!

“Do you know why?” She asked.

“Yes, but only loosely. Our theories are not yet fully able to stand up to scrutiny, but we hope that our examinations of your Riot Mark III will change that. In short, the fusion goes beyond the material. The metaphysical components of the mech and mech pilots have fused as well. If you separate one but not the other, then a terrible consequence will occur. The ‘soul’ of the mech pilot will not only remain behind in the machine, but the absence of the old human body will trigger a catastrophic consequence.”

“What happens?”

“Mech pilots below the rank of god pilots are still human, at least in part.” Vector seriously said. “What happens is similar to what happens if we completely digitize the brain of a human. He will lose his humanity and turn into a rigid machine. More egregiously than that, we have broken the anchor of a human soul to such a severe extent that it has become... broken. A broken vessel cannot adequately accommodate a human existence. The precise outcomes are different depending on the specific cases, but none of them are good. The most merciful outcome is that the disembodied human simply dies in an instant or disappears in silence. The less merciful ones are those where the pilots suffer great pain as their souls slowly crumble apart or steadily become subsumed by the machines that they have fused with. There are other unpleasant outcomes as well.”

In short, bad stuff happens if Ves and Gloriana rashly attempted to remove Saint Orfan's body from the Riot Mark III.

Even though her body was in a weird and awful state, it still served as a vital anchor for Saint Orfan's continued existence as a living human being.

"Do not feel too bad about it." Vector tried to reassure the pair. "This experiment of yours is still a relative success in our opinion. Your attempt could have easily produced much worse outcomes. Saint Rosa Orfan can still regain her human body while she is at least somewhat alive and functional. We may not be able to do so through surgery or other methods, but she herself possesses the power to move past this transformation and gain control over her own form. Do you understand what I am referring to, professors?"

Gloriana failed to connect the dots, but the same could not be said for Ves.

"You are talking about the road to no return, the ultimate steps that every ace pilot needs to complete in order to complete the ultimate breakthrough." Ves steadily answered. "From a more charitable perspective, you can say that Saint Rosa Orfan has already completed several steps of the Mech Body Merger Process in advance. This unconventional transformation combined with the formation of the Blood Pact means that our new ace pilot has potentially completed the first step, the second step and the third step. Potentially."

"...Doesn't that mean that Saint Orfan only needs to complete one more step before she can make the ultimate breakthrough?"

"There is... a small possibility that you are correct so long as her resonance strength has reached the limit of her current rank."

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Chapter 7242 Deviated Path Forward

Chapter 7242 Deviated Path Forward

"No." Ves shook his head. "I disagree with the framing. Completing 3 out of 4 steps of the Mech Body Merger Process is not necessarily beneficial to Saint Orfan. I do not believe that the requirements to transcend to godhood are that simple. The 4th step of achieving a total union between mech and machine sounds deceptively simple, but it has proven to be the number 1 reason why the vast majority of peak ace pilots ultimately falter and perish. It appears that removing a human's dependence on the human body that has nurtured and accompanied his soul for his entire life is one of the most difficult challenges that exist."

He did not understand enough about the Mech Body Merger Process and the breakthroughs of this exceedingly high level to say anything further.

It was safest to assume that he still remained unaware of all of the important variables that determined the success rate of the Mech Body Merger Process.

Factors such as resonance strength, the quality of a mech, the conviction of a peak ace pilot, age, combat experience and so much more also played a role in a breakthrough.

Therefore, just because Saint Orfan managed to 'complete' most of the steps of the Mech Body Merger Process did not mean that she could transcend her mortality much easier than other ace pilots.

Fortunately, the Transhumanists understood this truth as well.

"We are still waiting for Saint Rosa Orfan to regain her consciousness and communicate with us. Depending on how lucid she is and how functional she remains, we expect to obtain many answers from her." Vector told the pair of Larkinson mech designers. "Due to her mutations, we believe that she will have to follow a slightly different process if she wishes to resume her career and become a god pilot. I can imagine that she will become more motivated than ever to work for her next breakthrough. If she succeeds, she will gain the power to reshape her human body."

He was most likely correct. God pilots were fundamentally energy-based life forms. Their material bodies were not as important as before.

Of course, just because their God Kingdoms made up their actual 'bodies' did not mean that their physical forms became irrelevant. They still relied heavily on their god mechs to exert their strength to the fullest in the material realm.

God pilots were capable of many feats, but they could not whip up an extremely powerful mech by themselves. They still had to rely on Star Designers to shape their most formidable physical manifestations.

Of course, if there was no need for god pilots to wield so much power, then they could easily use their innate capabilities to mold a human body for themselves.

God pilots no longer possessed a dependence on their human bodies. Each time they presented themselves in this form, they were essentially piloting tiny meat puppets that just happened to resemble their forms back when they were mortal.

Some god pilots tried to preserve their prior human forms as precisely as possible.

They cared little about the flaws and imperfections that marked their bodies as they aged or suffered injuries.

Others reshaped their human bodies into younger and more idealized versions.

The Evolution Witch happened to do this as she had worked hard to transcend her flawed and incurable human body before her ascension.

All of these cases made it clear that their human physical forms were like putty in their hands.

Perhaps it was even possible for them to shape the bodies that belonged to other people and impersonate them. Not that god pilots would ever stoop so low.

"We are not quite certain whether the individual who wakes up will still be recognizable as Rosa Orfan." Ves voiced another concern. "It is clear that a fusion has occurred between man and machine. This means that it is not so easy to separate Saint Orfan from her living mech. Given that the latter became occupied by a dark and malevolent being, I fear that her recent breakthrough has accidentally worsened the situation by making the contamination permanent."

"Vector, could you tell us the mental state of the test pilots of those failed experiments? How much of their humanity did they manage to retain? Were they still recognizable, or did they experience a complete change in personality?"

The Transhumanist paused as he silently accessed a few records. "It depends. Deviations always occur. The severity of it is roughly in proportion to how much they have changed or fused to their machines. I am afraid that what has happened to Saint Orfan can be categorized as one of the more severe cases. This should normally be enough to shatter the sanity of any test pilot, but this case is different. We have never conducted any experiment of this magnitude on an ace pilot."

Somehow, Ves had a feeling that this was not the case. The MTA existed for a long time. The mechers possessed a lot of curiosity. Ves would not put it past them to secretly kidnap an ace pilot and conduct experiments on him just because they wanted to generate more research data.

Ves only believed that a Senior Mech Designer like Vector Loban likely remained in the dark about these classified and very much illegal experiments!

His wife relaxed after she remembered that Rosa Orfan was not a weak and fragile mortal.

No matter what she experienced during the first activation of the Riot Mark III, she eventually succeeded.

She had to retain at least a portion of herself, or else she wouldn't have been able to cling onto her extraordinary willpower.

Such potent willpower could only exist when the mech pilot possessed an unflinchingly strong belief in one's own self and existence.

This was not a property that others could steal or usurp.

The Prophet's Bane lacked the traits that made him worthy of forming extraordinary willpower, let alone borrowing it from others!

Since the Riot Mark III had unquestionably formed a Saint Kingdom in the short time following Saint Orfan's successful breakthrough, she should still be alive underneath all of that superdimensional matter and archetech.

They would have to wait to be certain. It could take weeks before Saint Orfan recovered from her ordeal and woke up again.

Gloriana hoped that she had not turned into a demon, though she was prepared for the worst.

"So how do we go forward from here?" Ves asked.

"The wellbeing of the pilot must come first." Vector Loban stated. "The Transhumanist Faction has a strong interest in finding out whether she can still prosper and do well in her unfortunate condition. We must provide her with all of the psychological support she needs to accept her new condition and work towards a better future. At the same time, we must upgrade, repair and modify the Riot Mark III as best we can. Now that you have embarked on this special project, you cannot abandon it midway. You have a responsibility to see this through. Our faction can make it easier by providing support services, but we must ultimately rely on your ingenuity to complete this fusion in the best way possible. This applies to both of you, by the way."

He pointedly directed his last remark towards Gloriana. It was pretty obvious that she felt sickened by what her work had wrought. She truly wanted to cut ties with the project that had spun out of her control, but Vector was right.

Even without the directive from the Transhumanist Faction, Gloriana owed it to the Riot as well as Saint Orfan to continue to take care of them. She knew that her continued involvement was vital as she was responsible for turning the Riot Mark III into an archemch.

Hardly any other third party mech designer had bothered to develop a specialization in archetech. Not even Ves understood this form of alien tech to the same degree.

This meant that Gloriana was stuck.

Unless her involvement was detrimental to them, then she could not turn away from their plight.

"I think there should be no problem with that." Ves responded to the Transhumanist liaison. "I was afraid that you guys would insist on taking the Riot away and stuff it in a secret lab or whatever. No matter what, Saint Orfan is still a Larkinson. We take care of our own. If the Riot Mark III is still functional enough despite all of the deviations, then it can serve as the most powerful protector of the Bluejay Fleet. We do not solely have to rely on 30 Ascended Giants to defend us against enemy champions."

The 15 Ur-Titans and 15 Faceless Giants represented a lot of combat power, but it was easy to overlook the fact that they were still lesser phase lords.

A sufficiently powerful enough greater phase lord or greater phase whale could still overpower them despite being heavily outnumbered. This should especially be the case if the powerful alien adversary was outfitted with a Saint Piercer or Saint Armor.

Only a full superdimensional ace mech such as the Riot could hold back such a threatening enemy. All others had no choice but to keep their distance and prevent themselves from getting hit at all cost.

Perhaps that might change again once the Ascended Giants received their stopgap superdimensional weapons and raiments.

"Rosa Orfan is a fighter." Gloriana stated. "If a semblance of her is still alive and in control of the Riot Mark III, then she will not want to remain idle. A mech is made to fight. The purpose of a mech pilot is to control a mech. Both will want to be used, preferably in active battles. The best way for Saint Orfan to heal and come to terms with her new condition is to enjoy all of the power she has gained. Regardless of all of the mutations, it is undeniable that the Mark III is much more powerful than the Mark II. She can finally realize many of the fantasies she has entertained in her mind."

Ves pointed out a necessary step. "We will need to upgrade the Riot Mark III from a high-tier expert mech into a junior ace mech first. The resonating exotics need to be swapped. I know we designed the mech to make this exchange as easy as possible, but... given how the machine has partially turned into Saint Orfan's body, I believe it is better for us to wait until she wakes up again. Who knows what harmful changes will ensue if we recklessly change such a vital aspect of her machine."

"I disagree, Ves." Gloriana responded with a frown. "We need to make this swap as soon as possible. Have you noticed that the resonance meter is still reading a low amount of true resonance from the Riot Mark III? I believe that Saint Orfan is continuing to deepen her connection to her mech. This is not a desirable occurrence as she is becoming more attached to a mech that has already become outdated. The longer this goes on, the more she will become hurt when we rip the BSN-17A and Pierrotis from the archemec frame. If we complete the exchange quickly, Saint Orfan will only experience moderate discomfort. We must make her acclimate to the new set of ace mech-grade resonating materials as quickly as possible."

Her logic was sound, but they lacked too much information to figure out what was best.

Should they upgrade the Riot Mark III right away, or should they wait a week or so until Saint Orfan finally regained her consciousness?

Both Ves and Gloriana turned to Vector.

"I do not dare to issue a judgment on this matter." The Transhumanist raised his palm. "I will transfer the details to more experienced and knowledgeable Master Mech Designers and record their answers. There is no guarantee that their verdicts are correct, so you do not have to follow their advice."

"I see. Well, it is still helpful to hear from other mech designers. We welcome their input."

Chapter 7243: Mutated Voribug Hives

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After the meeting concluded, Ves and Gloriana reluctantly called it a day. They assigned a few mech designers to monitor the Riot Mark III on a rotating basis before they chose to retire to their grand stateroom.

Their children all reacted with surprise after their parents briefly explained what had happened.

Andraste looked sympathetic. “Poor woman. Rosa doesn’t deserve this. I would hate it if I was forced to live the rest of my life as a machine.”

“That might not necessarily be the case.” Ves gently replied. “As long as she is able to become a god pilot, she will gain the power to shape her own destiny. We all believe it is not that difficult for her to reform a human body for herself again. Aside from that, I have been thinking about giving her a stopgap solution. The simplest answer is to connect her to a mechanical or bionic avatar that can roam around within a certain distance of herself. This is not a perfect solution by any means, but it is still sufficient to give her a semblance of human life.”

He already had a few ideas on how he could improve on this idea. Just because he could not restore her original human body did not mean he could give her opportunities to enjoy human-like experiences.

It all depended on how much he could mess with the Riot. Now that Saint Orfan had fused with it, changing any aspect of the mech entailed greater risks than usual.

Any significant change could either strengthen or weaken her soul. It may even change core aspects of her personality.

Due to these concerns, Ves and Gloriana ultimately decided to postpone any upgrades until she woke up again.

In the meantime, they could revise their old plans about swapping out the resonating exotics and investigate whether they need to make other changes for the Riot Mark III Revision B.

Ves happily foisted most of the work onto Gloriana’s lap.

“Why do I have to undertake this burden?” She asked with a voice devoid of enthusiasm.

“This sort of work is more technical and delicate. You are much better suited to apply physical tweaks to an archemeh. Besides, have you forgotten about my deal with the Dark Apostle? I borrowed a lot of time from him in advance. I am obliged to uphold my end of the bargain. I will surrender control over my true body to my other self for a handful of days. He will be spending his time over at the Armitage, so please take care of the Riot on my behalf.”

“What?” Gloriana looked outraged! “You are running away from your own problem! This is your mess, not mine! What if an incident occurs that only you can solve?!”

“Then call me over an emergency channel. The Dark Apostle will return control of my body to me and I will transfer over as quickly as possible.”

The pair continued to discuss their arrangements for the next week. It might not be fair to Gloriana to assume so many responsibilities, but Ves had no other choice.

“What will your other self be doing in the meantime?” She asked.

“That will be up to him. I expect my phase lord self to spend his valuable time on training and getting up to speed with his new leadership position. We also need to decide where exactly we should go and what we intend to do once we arrive at the frontlines.”

His wife grew grave. “Those mutated voribugs are dangerous. I have not spent much time on keeping up with the news of what is happening at the second Rubarthan front, but the news is still pessimistic. The reinforcements from the Cybernetic Empire are helping, but their efforts are not enough to stem the tide. For all of their vaunted CE tech, they can still get exhausted after getting flooded by unending tides of voribugs. At most, their warfleets are buying more time for evacuations. At least we will no longer see as many instances of entire populations getting abandoned and being left to the tender mercies of our alien enemies.”

The return of the Cybernetic Empire had not only changed the military landscape of red humanity, but also its infrastructure.

The Cybers had built up a huge merchant marine.

The Cybernetic Empire’s military aid was constrained by its own greed and ambition. The other major human powers were reluctant to give up so many resources, territories and manpower, afraid that they would ultimately contribute to the Polymath’s takeover of their people.

Fortunately, the Cybers were less reluctant in letting its merchant marine ply the star lanes.

Tens of thousands of cheap but serviceable civilian-grade cargo haulers had begun to engage in transport services.

While their service sounded a bit boring and unremarkable in an age where heroes and gods collided against each other, the value of all of these trading vessels was immense!

Not only was industry and trade beginning to work properly again, but many ships suddenly became available to assist with the relocation of humans on vulnerable planets to safer locations.

Of course, the Cybers were not doing this out of the good of their hearts.

The demand for logistical services had risen so much that many companies were willing to pay high premiums to contract the services of any cargo vessel, no matter whether they were Terran, Rubarthan or Cyber in origin.

This was also an easy way for the Cybers to connect to the wider human society that they had been separated from for over 50 years and earn a bit of goodwill in the process.

In addition, sending ships to evacuate large amounts of humans gave the Cybers an opportunity to bring back large amounts of people who would be happy to join the Cybernetic Empire and start new lives on newly colonized planets.

Many people could figure out that the Cybers were taking advantage of the ongoing wars to expand their population, but what could the others do? It was the fault of the established major powers that they were unable to protect their own citizens against their alien foes.

Ves was sure that the new front had become a political as well as a humanitarian mess.

It might not be wise for him to dip his toes into this crisis, but he was still determined to take a look for himself.

The native aliens had become old news to him. He craved a new challenge.

Perhaps many people considered the mutated voribugs unbeatable, but that just meant that red humanity had yet to properly study their new adversaries and developed proper counters.

The Dark Apostle happened to agree with this sentiment.

Once Ves transferred to the new ship that was assigned to the Phase Lord Department and gave up control to his alter ego, the Dark Apostle decided to hold a meeting to discuss their upcoming war plans.

Eliza Mo Ragadan, Andrea Vos and the Divine Harpoon attended the meeting in person.

The differences in size did not bother any of them. The Dark Apostle and the Divine Harpoon were perhaps the Ascended Giants who harbored the most respect towards red humans. They had no problems with letting the two regular-sized humans make themselves heard.

“Now that our ship is closing in on the frontlines, I want to make sure we arrive somewhere exciting.” The new polemarchos began. “I have tasked you to study what is taking place at the frontlines and form a recommendation on where we have the best chance of earning glory. Please share your findings.”

A short moment of silence ensued before Andrea Vos spoke first.

“A new development has occurred in the war against the mutated voribugs. The insectile aliens have begun to... differentiate from each other. The Secret Department can tell you more about this, but from what I understand, the entire body of mutated voribugs no longer fight in a completely uniform manner anymore. We have gathered more and more proof that the entire race... is splitting up into multiple distinct hives. Each of them have the same starting point, but are slowly beginning to evolve and develop their own traits.”

The others had already learned about this, but this was very much new to the Dark Apostle!

He couldn't help it as Ves had hogged so much time in order to complete the Riot Mark III Project.

The department head of the Phase Lord Department leaned forward. “Tell me more.”

“We have yet to gather enough proof, but one of our most convincing theories is that the powerful queen that is at the center of the mutated voribug race has chosen to delegate and diversify her massive swarm. Why it has done so remains unclear. Perhaps there is a limit to how many individual bugs she can directly control. Perhaps she is following a universal organic directive by birthing powerful offspring. Perhaps she wants to promote the evolution of her race by introducing internal competition.”

All of those theories sounded plausible, but Dark Apostle did not dare to put too much stock in any of them. Who knew if the completely alien voribug queen adhered to very different reasons.

“Our observations so far have exposed the existence of at least 6 hives, though we do not rule out the possibility that there are more. Regardless, the insects belonging to every hive are gradually beginning to evolve in different directions. They are developing subspecies that only belong to a

single hive, and they are also executing different strategies than the ones they have chosen in the past.”

This sounded rather familiar to Ves. Similar rationale could easily be applied to the phalanxes of the Phase Lord Department or how the Larkinson Army began to develop multiple different legions.

There was strength in diversity. It was not a good idea to rely on a single solution. The so-called Devourer Queen must have recognized this as well, and also acknowledged that it alone could not pursue multiple divergent evolutionary ideas.

That did not stop the Devourer Queen from solving this problem in a different way.

A projection came to life that showcased very recent snapshots and archival footage that showed the evolving hives in action.

Eliza Mo Ragadan continued her explanation.

“Only a relatively short amount of time has passed, but the mutated voribugs excel in speed. They are rapidly improving upon the mutations they apply to their fellow kind. We believe that every hive is led by a ‘voribug princess’, a mutated voribug bred for leadership and concession. One of them may even be strong enough one day to challenge the Devourer Queen and possibly their mother over control of the mutated voribugs.”

All of this sounded interesting, but the Dark Apostle could not help but deduce that very little of this information could be verified at this time.

“These princesses sound really important.” The giant began to smirk. “I bet that they are deployed closer to the frontlines. That makes them vulnerable. If we can track one of them down and capture it, we can bring it back and have our scientists figure out the secrets of the mutated voribug. Even if we cannot capture it, killing it will definitely produce results.”

“It will be challenging to track them down, sir.” The Farseer said. “The Devourer Queen is untraceable, and we believe that the princesses will also put great effort into hiding their locations. We will have to resort to much more time-consuming methods to have a chance of tracking just one of these hives. Even if you can ascertain their locations, the Bluejay Fleet is not equipped to commence an assault of this magnitude. It may ultimately necessitate the intervention of a god pilot to take down such a powerful alien adjutant.”

On second thought, it was indeed a reckless idea to target the so-called princesses directly.

The Bluejay Fleet was simply not ready. The armed forces at the Dark Apostle’s disposal was primarily geared to fight against more traditional enemies. The hives would eat them up if they chose to barge in unprepared.

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Chapter 7244: Goliath Hive

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The emergence of 6 increasingly more distinct hives was bad news for red humanity. It showed that the mutated voribugs were advancing as a civilization. Perhaps ordinary people might view it as a sign of weakness on the part of the mysterious Devourer Queen, but the Dark Apostle and others knew better. The introduction of a deeper and more organized hierarchy would allow for better management of the mutated voribugs. By tasking the 'princesses' of these hives to pursue different strategies, the mutated voribugs could try out multiple approaches to warfare. This would allow them to rapidly learn what worked and what did not work for their particular race.

The more successful princesses might receive great favor and become the designated successors of the queen. The less successful ones would either be replaced or be allowed to make a comeback in order to provide more competition for their more successful peers. Their introduction added a powerful social dynamic in their racial group. It brought a new layer of socialization, governance, culture and more. This would ultimately make the mutated voribugs more resilient and difficult to eradicate. Many people would much prefer it if they remained stupid and brainless space insects that only knew how to swarm their prey.

The Dark Apostle's chief of staff proceeded to give a short presentation of the 6 hives that have made an appearance up to this point. "The 3 hives that are assaulting red humanity from the Rubarthan front have been designated as the Goliath Hive, the Superswarm Hive and the Solari Hive." The human spoke as stood in front of her seat. "In a single week, they have already begun to try out new strategies across dozens of star systems. The speed in which they are adapting their forces has taken many defenders by surprise. In certain cases, this has led to unexpected defeats." The projections showed clips of very recent battle footage. If the distinction between hives was not clear enough, the voribugs had even begun to add color to their otherwise plain and boring exoskeletons!

"Who came up with those names?"

"A Star Designer, a god pilot or a think tank comprised of exobiologists." Eliza dismissively shrugged. "The names are not important. They are labels that we use to remind other humans what to expect from the hives. In no way have the voribugs communicated with us. For all we know, their conception of language is completely different from ours."

The Dark Apostle leaned forward as he studied the projected battle footage. He could clearly see that the voribugs had made an effort to diversify their strategies and set the hives apart from each other. It was as if the queen at the top grew jealous of its enemies and became a lot more adamant about building up a civilization.

The chief of staff pointed at one of the projections, causing it to magnify in size. The enlarged projection displayed instances of yellow voribugs swarming human defensive positions. That did not sound special per se, but what truly caught the Dark Apostle's attention was the presence of larger and much more powerful voribugs. Their frequency was low. Millions if not billions of

cannon fodder accompanied each voribug that could easily become as large as a mech or even a lesser phase lord!

"The yellow voribugs have been designated as the Goliath Hive. The princess of this hive is attempting to imitate both humans and the native aliens by developing the voribug equivalent of champion units. In this case, the hive develops a much more sophisticated strain of voribug subspecies and invests a large amount of phasewater as well as mid to high-grade exotics and hypers. The results consist of small amounts of very powerful 'Goliath' subspecies that can actually hold their own against expert mechs and lesser phase lords. We have already identified 15 subspecies and more will emerge with every passing week."

These goliaths towered over their mundane insect brothers and wielded powers that may have been based on exobeasts. Their yellow exoskeletons were extraordinarily thick and could withstand concentrated bombardment from human warships for a moderate amount of time. The goliaths were not entirely unique. There were hundreds of them already, but each of them fit into at least 15 distinct templates. It reminded the Dark Apostle how human high-ranking mechs often fit into a finite number of recognizable mech archetypes.

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"It really feels as if the Goliath Hive is trying to copy our champions down to developing different 'archetypes'. Do these Goliaths all remain the same within their subspecies, or will they grow and become more unique over time?"

"Not enough time has passed to make that determination, sir, but our analysis predicts that the Goliaths will likely maintain uniformity between themselves. If the individual Goliaths are permitted to grow, then they will likely remain uniform within their subspecies. Each of them are rough diamonds. The princess of the hive is likely monitoring their performance closely. Each imperfection will be removed from every member of a Goliath strain. Each helpful addition will spread to all of the Goliaths of a single strain because it makes sense for them to adhere to best practices."

That was different to how the native aliens and red humanity treated their champions. It was a good choice. What the Goliath Hive lacked in individualism, it made up for it in quantity. There was no need for the Goliath Hive to spend an excessive amount of thought, effort and resources to develop millions of Goliath strains. It was better to stick to a manageable number of champion subspecies that were diverse enough to address the vast majority of challenges on the battlefield.

The Dark Apostle already began to gain a certain understanding of the intelligence of the princess of the Goliath Hive. This was an intelligent adversary who likely understood its enemies the most! After all, the Goliaths were likely based on existing human and alien champions. There was no need for the voribugs to trouble themselves with coming up with original ideas when their enemies already presented them with ready-made templates.

"The Goliath Hive is straining the defenses of numerous star systems because the Goliaths can easily overrun ordinary units by relying on their excessive power and resilience." The Farseer explained to the Dark Apostle. "The weapons and units needed to defeat large swarms are not that effective against champion units. The Goliaths can only be confronted and repelled by disproportionate firepower or high-ranking mech pilots that have the ability to penetrate thick exoskeleton armor."

"Are the Goliaths making use of energy-based defenses?"

"No, sir. We do not know whether the voribugs are still working on them or have simply decided that it is not worth the trouble. For now, their primary means of defense are their thick exoskeletons. Certain Goliath strains also excel in speed and are good at evasion. Since these Goliaths are often accompanied by swarms of mutated voribugs, they can also rely on the ordnance fodder around them to block incoming attacks, inconvenience adversary champions and exert pressure elsewhere. The Goliaths never truly fight alone. Their teamwork with other voribugs is surprisingly good."

That was a massive advantage! Normal champions ordinarily did not allow for regular units to assist them in combat because their attacks and movements could easily endanger large amounts of friendlies. Few people could forgive an ace pilot that accidentally opened fire on hundreds of friendly mechs! This behavior crossed a line that high-ranking mech pilots had rarely if ever crossed during the entirety of the Age of Mechs. The native aliens may be more tolerant towards sacrifice, but even the most callous of alien phase leaders did not dare to taint the sanctity of their own godhoods by butchering their mortal flock. In contrast, the voribugs had nothing to worry about. The value of individual voribugs was worth almost nothing. They all died by the trillions as they threw themselves onto the defenses of their enemies, yet none of the bugs had any desire to complain because they were completely subservient to their queen and possibly their princesses!

What this effectively meant was that the Goliaths could easily surround themselves with millions of annoying bugs over the course of a battle. The lives of these cannon fodder bugs did not matter. No matter whether they died to human or insect attacks was irrelevant as they could easily be replaced. This was the advantage of the mutated voribugs!

The Dark Apostle grimaced and pressed his giant fingers against his giant face. "Since the Goliath Hive is so eager to imitate us, then their Goliaths are likely worth fighting against. I do not look forward to getting swarmed by their cannon fodder during a confrontation, though. It is probably too much to expect the uncivilized insects to respect the sanctity of a duel."

At least the native aliens somewhat shared this in common with the humans. They were both civilizations that revered their own champions and believed that they had an intrinsic right to duel each other without excessive intervention from other units. Of course, not everyone accepted a duel when requested. Neither the humans or the aliens were stupid. If one side had an overwhelming advantage, then it was correct for it to overpower the weaker side by relying on numbers.

"So far, the Goliaths have only demonstrated hints of individualism." Eliza Mo Ragadan explained. "We are not yet clear whether their princess is willing to make them smarter and delegate command of the nearby swarms to them, or prefers to remain in direct control over them. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches, but so far we expect the Goliath Princess to maintain direct control."

This had a lot of implications if it was true. The Dark Apostle frowned. "If this is the case, then every Goliath strain will fight in the same way. That will make them more predictable, but it also means that the princess will rapidly gain experience when 'piloting' them. The more time passes by, the more she can strengthen the design of her Goliath strains while simultaneously becoming more skilled in controlling them in battle."

A heavy silence followed after he spoke these words.

The Divine Harpoon finally opened his mouth for the first time since he attended this meeting. "The Goliath Princess — if she even exists — may be taking inspiration from mech pilots by adopting this method of command and control. This will make her exceptionally dangerous over time. She will never cease learning how to defeat and counter us in the most effective manner. While she will likely neglect the development of her cannon fodder, that is not important so long as they can still do their current jobs. I believe her ultimate goal is to develop Goliaths that are so strong and successful that they can even pose a threat against our god pilots."

God pilots were the ultimate trump cards of red humanity. One of the reasons why people did not surrender to complete despair was because the mutated voribugs had yet to present anything that could defeat god pilots in direct combat. While it may be theoretically possible for the mutated voribugs to exhaust the combat power of god pilots or distract them by spreading out their important infrastructure across many territories, it was unthinkable for the voribugs to defeat these human deities outright. Yet what if that was no longer the case? What if the Goliath Hive spent enough time on learning what made high-ranking mechs strong and became increasingly more proficient at defeating them on the battlefield?

Expert mechs were not easy to defeat, but it should already be possible for the early generations of Goliaths to achieve victory. They were clearly not ready to defeat ace mechs at this time, but maybe the Goliaths could still make the impossible happen by relying on their numbers advantage. So long as they built upon these successes and continually improved their Goliath strains, they may one day force a god mech to retreat from the battlefield!

Chapter 7245: Superswarm Hive

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The Goliath Hive sounded like a formidable threat, especially in the long term. The combat footage showed that the Goliaths were largely oversized voribugs for the time being, but nobody believed they would remain that simple. It was highly likely that they would continue to develop their own advantages and pose a credible threat against high-ranking mechs and phase leaders. It was easy to dismiss the Goliath Hive as copycats, but it was not always a bad thing to imitate the best practices of your enemies. The voribugs may be a lot different from the other races, but it should have plenty of ways to accommodate the so-called Goliaths into their ranks.

"The Goliath Hive is the least intensive hive that the Rubarthans are facing at the moment." Eliza Mo Ragadan said. "The excessive emphasis on developing Goliaths requires high-quality materials that are scarce and hard to find in most star systems. It is difficult to develop a new strain or improve it while still making them resource efficient. The hive must be squandering a large amount of resources on acquiring the right materials and developing the most cost-effective strains. All of this activity has caused the Goliath Hive to pressure the least amount of star systems... for the time being."

The unspoken implication was that the Goliath voribugs would become a lot scarier once it had completed the development of mature Goliath strains and was able to pump them out by the thousands!

"What about the next hive?"

"The Superswarm Hive largely follows the opposite strategy. It has given up entirely on fielding elite units and instead focuses solely on consuming enemies by relying on quantity alone. This particular hive most closely follows the original strategy of the mutated voribugs, but that does not mean that it is simple. The Superswarm Hive has chosen to be more deliberate in how to utilize its forces."

The combat footage that highlighted the Superswarm Hive all depicted unending tides of bugs with bright and obvious orange coloring. Similar to the Riot Mark III, these bugs had no intention of hiding themselves and wanted to attract as much attention to themselves. Their numbers were awe-inspiring. They lacked the enormous Goliaths, but made up for it by throwing wave after wave of cannon fodder into the Rubarthan defenses. When met with a large amount of wide area weapon attacks, millions if not tens of millions of bugs died with every passing second. Yet that did not deter all of the other voribugs in the slightest. They kept coming and battering themselves against the azure energy shields or armor plating of the defending troops. Orange. Orange everywhere. Many defenders who failed to retreat in time became drowned in a tide of orange.

"The Superswarm Hive has made a number of strategic adjustments after coming into existence." The leader of staff continued to explain. "It has chosen to invade star systems by starting from the outer system and occupying as many asteroids and terrestrial planets as possible. These locations are usually poor in high-quality resources, but still offer more than enough low-quality materials to support the proliferation of large amounts of cannon fodder. It is virtually impossible to stop the Superswarmers once they have entered the star system. The outer asteroid belts are too large and while they are all cold and distant locations, the voribugs are still capable of generating energy by consuming certain materials that are common in asteroids."

That meant that the Superswarmers started out slow, but could not be stopped. Eradicating them was too much work. It took an enormous amount of manpower or long-ranged detection systems that did not exist as of yet to nip the invasion in the bud. Once the Superswarm voribugs had spread across enough asteroids, they could finally launch wave after wave of cannon fodder at the human positions without worrying about losing any ground. The human defenders had no choice but to stay on the defensive if they wanted to preserve all of their settlements! Being outnumbered on a permanent basis meant that there was no way the defenders had any mechs or warships to spare for any counterattacks.

It would be useless to send a small task force to the outer system. The speed of wiping out the asteroids that the Superswarm Hive transformed into organic mass production facilities could never keep up with the rate in which the voribugs established new growing pools! The Superswarm Hive clearly committed everything on attrition warfare. Its princess cared nothing for producing more powerful voribugs. Every opposition could be worn down as long as the Superswarmers continued to exploit the abundant amount of low-quality resources in most star systems.

"As much as I dislike it, the Ascended Giants are not equipped to fight against the Superswarm Hive." The Divine Harpoon said. "We can rely on our spatial abilities to slay voribugs on an enormous scale, but we can only keep up this effort for several hours at most before we reach exhaustion. Our true bodies have excellent endurance, but even we can tire ourselves out if we keep swinging our weapons. I do not recommend we target the Superswarm Hive."

The others nodded as well. None of them were stupid. The Superswarm Hive needed to be defeated by a force that could adequately wipe out masses of voribugs without getting exhausted. Yet that was seemingly impossible, with even god pilots choosing to avoid this disgusting enemy due to their shameless approach.

"I agree with you, at least for now. Maybe Ves or other brilliant people can devise a weapon that can slaughter entire swarms and stop the aliens from draining the natural bounty of a star system to fuel their need to produce offspring, but that will take time and require the involvement of special groups that we do not fall under."

"I would not be so quick to dismiss your lack of agency, sir." Andrea Vos spoke up. "The Red Collective has not remained idle while the mutated voribugs have proven themselves to be an existential threat to our race and civilization. My fellow formation masters and I have remained in contact with the Astral Octagon and other locations. We have developed the most rudimentary version of a plan."

She waved her hand, causing another projection to appear. It was part of a virtual document that outlined a planet that was being surrounded by an energy shield of sort that enveloped the entire globe!

"Impossible." Eliza Mo Ragadan frowned immediately. "Building an enormous azure shield generator is pointless even if the tech and materials are available. The energy requirements to keep it running is astronomical to an unbelievable degree. Even then, so long as the Superswarmers keep crashing into it by the billions, the azure energy shield will collapse after reaching its limit."

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The Farseer smirked back at the other woman. "That would normally be the case if we are talking about a technological energy shield. The finite supply of electric energy or resources that can be converted into electric energy will doom any attempt to shield a planet from a voribug invasion. In the end, every power source will reach exhaustion if the components have not worn out first. What the Red Collective can offer is an alternative that is more sustainable. Have you figured it out yet, sir?"

It took a few seconds for the Dark Apostle to connect the dots. He suddenly recalled Andrea Vos' profession.

"Are you talking about... shielding a planet by relying on qi formations?"

"Yes! There are formation masters who have chosen to specialize in developing and deploying defensive spell arrays. They have already begun to make them and employ them to defend important locations such as the Astral Octagon and other critical sites. Their effective ranges varies considerably. The largest defensive arrays can probably offer modest defensive shielding on a medium-sized metropolis, but are prohibitively expensive to make. However, their greatest advantage is that the costs are all upfront. So long as the hideously costly formation anchors are deployed and activated, the spell array can run at a relatively low intensity for an indefinite period of time."

"Because they run on E energy, not electric energy." The Dark Apostle widened his eyes in realization. "I see. E energy radiation is a free energy source for all intents and purposes. As long as you can deploy a defensive qi formation that can cover an important colony, the voribugs won't be able to take it down by relying on masses of weak cannon fodder."

"That is the ideal that we are striving for." The Farseer said. "However, we are only in the early stages of making this happen. We, the body of formation masters, have to complete numerous advancements before we can complete such an ambitious project. Scale is the greatest problem. It is not enough to deploy a city-wide defensive spell array. We may be able to shield a city from the voribug menace, but that will not help when the rest of the planet is literally being devoured by trillions of hungry insects."

If the voribugs wanted to, they could literally eat the planet underneath the settlement in question!

"I can see why that may be the case. What else?"

"The second major problem is power. A weak defensive qi formation can withstand attacks up to a certain intensity. The input of E energy must match or exceed the peak consumption of E energy when the qi formation is under heavy attack. This is a challenge as E energy radiation is not that strong. The only way to capture more E energy per second is to create larger and better formation anchors."

The Dark Apostle understood this problem easily enough. Free energy did not translate into having an infinite amount of energy available at any point of time. Just like how wind turbines could only spin so fast when the wind was not blowing particularly hard, a medium-energy environment was unable to support the demands of a particularly hungry qi formation.

There was a simple solution to this problem, though.

"If E energy radiation alone is not enough to support a formation, why not create batteries that can store excess E energy. That way, you can slowly use them up when the voribugs make a particularly big push."

"That is one of the ideas that we have been exploring." The Farseer replied. "It may not solve the problem if the voribugs keep attacking until the reserves have been drained, but they should at least be able to buy time. However, there is also a third problem, which is cost. The research projects that go into developing formation anchors and 'E energy batteries' are prohibitively expensive, especially if they are designed to operate at a planetary scale. There is a high degree of urgency when it comes to reducing their cost."

Even if this research effort succeeded, the Red Collective could not justify the decision to deploy this defensive measure on any planet. Perhaps only the most critical and economically important globes would enjoy this treatment. The Rubarthan Pact was not weak or penniless by any means, but the pressure of defending against the mutated voribugs had put a enormous strain on its finances. Combined with the burden of offering heavy concessions to the Cybernetic Empire in exchange for vital military aid, the Rubarthans simply could not afford to deploy planetary-scale defensive spell arrays across the entire frontlines.

"The third major problem is the most serious one as far as I can see." The female formation master added. "The first two problems are due to lack of research and development. We have not invested

enough in large-scale defensive qi formations. Once we concentrate our efforts in this area and achieve results, we will be able to create viable solutions. What hinders us is that viable does not necessarily equate to practical or economical. There is only so much E energy radiation that we can draw from the environment."

This was indeed a tricky problem.

"If this does not work out, then I hope that others can develop a better solution. I have no interest in seeing the mutated voribugs devour the entire Red Ocean."

Chapter 7246: Solari Hive

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It was a great relief to know that the Red Collective was working on a promising idea to defend planets against the voribug menace. Formation masters were about to become a very popular profession once it became known that they had the most promise when it came to building a sustainable defense against mutated voribug invasions. The RC was definitely not the only group to develop a solution. Others were probably doing this as well, if only to ensure that their territories and holdings would not collapse if the voribugs managed to overrun the Rubarthan Pact. The Dark Apostle still believed that relying on a defensive qi formation was ultimately the most sustainable solution. It would be extremely advantageous for the weak and mortal humans to build a shield that largely remained active by absorbing E energy radiation that was everywhere. While he could think of a few ways to undermine this defensive measure, it would still take a lot of effort from the mutated voribugs to defeat it entirely. He hoped that the formation masters could produce a result sooner rather than later. The news from the frontlines of the Rubarthan Pact kept sounding worse over time. Just thinking about it made the Dark Apostle feel uneasy. Despite his chosen moniker, he did not actually want to spread desolation at an apocalyptic scale. He just wanted to carve a place in the dwarf galaxy for himself and the Ascended Giants. Whether he would have to maintain a dependency relationship with the humans did not matter so much to him anymore when the mutated voribugs would gladly devour both of their races if given the chance! In a way, the mutated voribugs were the perfect enemies to promote cooperation between humans and Ascended Giants. The insects earned no sympathy. No human possessed any emotional baggage that could prompt them to prioritize the lives of these disgusting space vermin. Letting the Ascended Giants fight side by side with humans to combat this collective threat would do wonders for interspecies cooperation.

The Dark Apostle was very much aware that there was no other way out for his 'people'. This was also one of the reasons why he was enthusiastic to fight against the latest enemy menace. There was no better way to melt the hostility and tension between the two groups than to forge bonds of trust on the battlefield. To be able to do that without messing up, the Dark Apostle needed to be careful about where to deploy and which hive he should fight against first.

"Tell us about the third hive."

Eliza Mo Ragadan complied with his order. "The third hive that is assailing the contested border regions of the Rubarthan Pact is the Solari Hive. As its name suggests, the Solari Hive has a strong relationship with the energies produced by the stars in the skies. Whereas the Superswarmers desire to conquer star systems by starting from the coldest reaches in the periphery, the Solarii

prefer to settle the satellites that are the closest to a star. This will expose their voribugs to a great amount of thermal energy, which they can readily use to accelerate their growth and procreation."

The projection showed how such a conquest unfolded. "Only a small amount of Solarii are needed to infiltrate a globe in the inner system. They could either drift on a small and insignificant asteroid that just happened to be flung at the planet, or they could hitchhike on a starship that hasn't been properly cleansed of a bug infection. Whatever the case, so long as a Solari voribug has landed on a hot planet, it can immediately begin to procreate and expand its numbers on a rapid scale. The hotter the planet, the faster the reproduction rate. The resources of planets that are closer to stars often tend to be fairly decent, so the average quality of a Solari voribug is also higher on average. This is usually enough to rapidly overwhelm whatever defenses humans have built on the planet if they have bothered to do so. In sparser star systems, that is not the case as it is difficult to justify the expenses."

The expansions always happened quickly. Hot planets or asteroids were ideal breeding grounds for Solari voribugs because they provided an abundance of energy and matter. That was all the insects needed to explode in numbers in the shortest possible time. The Rubarthans were not prepared against the Solarii. They had previously dispatched many patrols to the outer system to detect and hinder Superswarm-style invasions as much as possible. This just happened to leave their armed forces in a very poor position to respond to rapidly escalating crises that kicked off in the inner system! It only took a few mistakes for an entire hot planet to become engulfed with voribugs in a matter of days! Once all of these bugs began to spread out and infect other nearby satellites, it became incredibly difficult to defend against the onslaught. The expansion rate was too high and the defenders usually weren't prepared to fend off such a high-speed onslaught.

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It was easy to deduce that the Solarii preferred to start their invasion in the inner system because they wanted to take settlements by surprise. So long as they could complete the first steps of their invasion cycle quickly enough, the Solari voribugs could rapidly assault a human-occupied star system within a week, which was not enough time to transfer a lot of reinforcements! In fact, shortly after the Solari Hive emerged, it was already on the verge of conquering half a dozen star systems where this sequence had occurred! The Solari must be preparing to capture dozens more star systems utilizing the same strategy. The Rubarthans came under even greater pressure. Not only did they have to remain on guard against the Superswarmers, they also had to watch over their hot planets for fear of letting the Solarii take root. This was maddening!

"These Solari voribugs are black. That is odd."

"Yes." Eliza confirmed. "The Solarii are the only mutated voribugs that have adopted a functional color. Early autopsies have confirmed that they are adapted to absorb as much heat energy as possible and convert that into useful energy that can promote their growth or strengthen their attacks. Compared to other voribugs, they are exceptionally good at resisting energy attacks. However, the same biological adaptations make them much more vulnerable to kinetic attacks. They have proven to be considerably less resistant towards old-fashioned bullets and kinetic rounds."

"I imagine that the Solarii do not care about that. They can reproduce so quickly that they can mobilize more voribugs than the defenders have bullets."

His leader of staff nodded. "That is unfortunately the case. It is harder to resupply units that use up physical ammunition as opposed to energy cells. High-quality weapons designed to penetrate azure energy shields and transphasic armor are overkill when used against the voribugs. Most kinetic weapons such as gauss rifles have a slower firing rate because penetration power matters more than attack rate. These weapons may play a good role when employed against Goliaths, but they are the wrong weapons to use against the Solarii voribugs, which are not as weak as Superswarm voribugs but are not particularly strong either."

Early indications showed that the Solari Hive preferred to settle for a middle ground in terms of quality. It mostly took advantage of the heavy metals and other decent materials available at planets that typically orbited closer to stars. The better the materials, the harder the voribugs.

"Is there anything else that makes the Solarii special?"

"Yes. This is still a preliminary development, but we have detected that the proportion of black voribugs that can launch energy attacks has increased in the last few days. If this is not a fluke but a serious trend, then that indicates that the Solari Hive will rely much more heavily on voribugs that can attack enemies at range as opposed to the simpler strategy of swarming their enemies up close. At worst, the Solarii may become siege experts by relying on their energetic bugs to launch massed energy attacks at defensive locations."

This was a concerning development. Most of the voribugs so far preferred to get close and chew their enemies to death. This was a primitive and predictable approach that was easier to counter. If the mutated voribugs started to diversify their attack methods and figured out ways to launch laser beams or even plasma bolts, they could open up a lot of new attack strategies that would make them harder to defend against! Perhaps a single ranged voribug did not pose too much of a threat, but what about a million? What about a billion? With enough ranged voribugs, the Solari Hive might even be able to repel a greater phase lord!

The Dark Apostle frowned as he took in the traits of all of these hives. "So this is what the Rubarthans have to contend against."

"Yes, sir. The native aliens are not exposed against these hives. They are being assaulted by other hives that possess their own traits and colors. This is further proof that the leaders of the mutated voribug species are sapient and intelligent. It is not yet clear why the Devourer Queen has appointed different hives to different adversaries, but for the time being we should only concern ourselves with the Goliath Hive, the Superswarm Hive and the Solari Hive."

The diversification of the mutated voribugs presented additional problems to the Dark Apostle. He initially thought that he could come in and work together with his weaker human self to develop a good game plan against the space vermin. However, now that different hives emerged that all chose to diverge from each other, a solution that worked on one set of mutated voribugs might not necessarily work against the other sets! How devious. This development meant that countering the mutated voribug race had become much more of a team effort than before. The Dark Apostle could not become the sole savior of red humanity anymore. At most, he could help the Rubarthans mitigate their losses by figuring out a way to fend off one of the three hives that actively assaulted human-occupied space.

"We should start with focusing on how to hinder the invasion of a single hive. There will be others who will focus on defeating the other hives." The Farseer suggested. "Which hive do you prefer to

confront first? My personal preference is the Superswarm Hive for the reason that I have previously mentioned. This hive's lack of Goliaths or other strong units makes it easier to repel them with the help of a planetary-scale qi formation."

"That may be true, but we have a total of 31 Ascended Giants in our fleet." The Divine Harpoon spoke up. "We did not come to this front to exterminate an endless amount of pests. These Goliaths are the only enemies that are worth confronting. While they are crude, they should still give our boys a good enough exercise. Defeating them will quickly reduce the pressure of the star systems under siege by the Goliath Hive."

It was not that difficult for the Dark Apostle to make up his mind.

"I am the head of the Phase Lord Department." The new polemarchos declared. "I am not the head of the Qi Formation Department or whatever. It is not my priority to cater to your needs, Farseer. Instead, it is the other way around. You should cater to my needs. As far as I am concerned, the Divine Harpoon is right. We need worthy enemies to fight against, and the Goliath Hive just so happens to present us with big enough strains to present a decent challenge. The Bluejay Fleet must divert its course to the Rubarthan star system that is most under siege by the Goliaths. The sooner we arrive, the sooner the Ascended Giants can make a name for themselves."

It should not take long before the Ascended Giants and the Goliaths warred against each other!

Chapter 7247: More Ratios

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After deciding to target the Goliath Hive, the rest of the meeting unfolded without any notable excitement. They just talked about mundane matters such as navigation, safety and liaising with the Rubarthans. As a tier 2 galactic citizen, Ves and by extension the Dark Apostle was entitled to special treatment. In fact, it would be better if a 'non-combatant' as important as him stayed far away from the dangerous front! Since that was not an option, the Rubarthans had to send additional reinforcements to the destination in order to make sure their guest did not befall any accidents.

The Dark Apostle preferred to tell these worrywarts not to bother, but his words would probably fall on deaf ears. The Bluejay Fleet subsequently set off to a fortified star system that was currently under heavy attack by the Goliath Hive. Due to Ves Larkinson's imminent promotion to a tier 2 galactic citizen, the escort force had bulked up substantially since recently. All of the transfers that occurred during and after Ves' visit to the Yernstall Central Star Node easily doubled the amount of hulls. The RA committed 1 heavy cruiser, 2 light cruisers, 2 destroyers and 4 combat carriers holding 20 first-class multipurpose mechs and 1 infantry battalion each.

The mechers must have talked it over with the fleeters because they transferred away a handful of warships in favor of bringing in more combat carriers. It was very clear that the 80 first-class multipurpose mechs were the real powerhouses of this relatively small force. The RF contributed 1 reconnaissance cruiser, 7 light cruisers, 12 destroyers, 4 stealth corvettes, 2 military transport vessels and 1 naval field repair vessel. It was disappointing that the fleeters declined to dispatch any heavy cruisers or battleships, but the RF had reached a point where their larger hulls became

increasingly more scarce. Any battleship that met their end on the battlefield was unlikely to be replaced by a similar hull.

The fleeters were feeling the pinch. Even with the recent support provided by the Cybernetic Empire, the RF simply couldn't afford to commit two to four years of yard time just to construct extremely expensive battleship hulls. This was especially difficult during a time of rapid change. The Age of Dawn had only just begun. Red humanity was still making rapid technological progress. A hull laid down today could already become severely outdated just 2 years later. The new trend within the RF amounted to doing more with less. Rather than construct big and expensive warships that were all too vulnerable to getting wrecked by the weakest alien phase lords, it was much more sensible to build lots of small and nimble warships that packed a decent punch but could still outrun enemy champions.

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While it was not always possible for lighter warships to flee from every alien phase lord, they at least gained a higher chance to evade destruction and return to friendly space intact and whole. Of course, this was mostly a loss-mitigation strategy. The truth of the matter was that the Red Fleet simply couldn't support the tonnage it was fielding at the moment. Many of its hulls originated from the old galaxy. The Common Fleet Alliance had no problem supporting so many warfleets before the Age of Dawn, but the Great Severing happened too soon for the fleeters to build the corresponding infrastructure in the new frontier.

In short, it was actually quite generous for the fleeters to supply so many smaller warships to the Bluejay Fleet. While the lack of battleships was still distressing, keeping these big boys out of the equation kept the Bluejay Fleet fast and nimble, which was crucial to escorting a VIP to safety. At least the fleeters upgraded the existing hulls such as the Babylon Excavator while supplying lots of modern warships that had been designed from the ground up to incorporate new advancements in hyper technology and phasewater technology. The ships hit harder, could withstand more damage and had become a lot more mobile. The RF had done its best to maintain their relevancy in the new age. The fleeters could not afford to lose their military supremacy.

So far, only a small group of people knew that the fleeters collaborated heavily with the collies to develop so-called artifact warships. The RF had even been generous enough to add a couple of prototypes to the Bluejay Fleet, though it remained unclear what advantages they possessed. The RC contingent of the Bluejay Fleet was the real sun of the show. While the collies only contributed a single giant carrier, 2 light cruisers and 2 stealth frigates, the former was by far the most important vessel. As the only capital ship of the Bluejay Fleet, the giant carrier was more than a repurposed fleet carrier.

The Dark Apostle had already toured the 3-kilometer long ship and almost fell in love with the vessel. The Armitage was long but fairly narrow. Much of the space was taken up by large cargo holds that contained a large amount of giant-sized weapons and raiments. While all of this gear took up a large amount of volume, the logistical burden of supporting all of the pieces was significantly lower. A couple of hundred mechs not only needed storage space, but also dedicated maintenance crews, spare parts, workshops, support for mech pilots and so much more. All of that apparently imposed a greater burden than accommodating the gear of 31 Ascended Giants. Unfortunately, the gear was all scaled according to the standards set by the individual phalanxes.

Currently, the Ur-Titan Phalanx set their scale at 2.5x, which basically meant that the weapons and raiments were designed to be 2.5 times larger than a typical mech. The Faceless Giants only set their standards at 1.5x, which made them significantly smaller but also easier to field in larger numbers. The amount of phasewater needed to increase this scale factor rose drastically due to the square-cube law. This was why it was not so easy for the Faceless Giants to reach 2.5x considering their lower budget and much greater headcount. Whatever the case, the Dark Apostle expected the existing phalanxes to slowly increase their standards over time. Only a short time had passed since the first Ascended Giants came into existence. They all needed more time to develop their strength and increase their phasewater concentration further.

Besides, all of the fighting against alien phase lord had taught both sides that bigger was not always better. A huge phase lord may have gained a huge amount of leverage and ability to exert a lot of force, but it also turned the fool into a giant target that was far too expensive to clad with armor. This was why more and more phase lords tended to make themselves smaller than usual in order to make themselves nimbler and harder to strike. Ves and the Dark Apostle were not sure what the ideal scale should be for the different phalanxes, but it should not be too big.

As far as they were concerned, 2.5x was not enough for a lesser phase lord. It would be much more impressive if the Ascended Giants could field hundreds of phase lords that could be 3x or 4x. A ratio higher than 10x was probably pushing it as the added durability was not worth the reduction in mobility. That was firmly juggernaut territory, which meant that any organism that reached this size played by a different set of rules.

The Dark Apostle had experimented with different sizes in person whenever the opportunity arose. He was able to achieve a ratio of 7x, which was quite impressive since his phasewater concentration was just 5.6 percent. This put him significantly ahead of most of the Ascended Giants. That was not bad since Ves did not often invest in his phase lord cultivation.

One of the Dark Apostle's greatest shortcomings at the moment was not only his lack of mature fighting skills, but also his rather meager phasewater organs. He did not have enough of them to fully define his intended combat approach. Numerous phasewater organs were also rather basic and could definitely benefit from upgrades or outright replacements. The Dark Apostle talked to the doctors of the Phase Lord Department about expanding his collections of phasewater organs.

"We do not recommend you integrate more phasewater organs at this time. The risks of complications are too great. You are still injured and in the process of recovering to full health. You have also integrated a lesser Marigal organ several weeks ago. You need to spend more time allowing your latest organ to settle and for your physique to stabilize. We are concerned that unforeseen complications can arise due to your abnormal conditions. You told us that your phasewater concentration automatically increases when you undergo a 'tribulation' or integrate new phasewater organs, correct?"

"Yes." The Dark Apostle felt rather silly for nodding in front of a puny human doctor, but it was not as if there were any Ascended Giants bothered to study medicine and biology. "I think that upgrading an inferior organ for a high-grade version also produces the latter effect. I never asked for this. As far as I know, the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean is unusually invested in me and wants to turn me native for whatever reason. I resent the fact that I cannot control this process. If I want to raise my phasewater concentration, it should be my decision."

"Other Ascended Giants would be more than happy to take your place, sir. Their means of body cultivation is much more costly and tedious for them. They do not get their additional phasewater for free. They need to obtain it from other sources and absorb it into their bodies one way or another. Pain is unavoidable. The most effective method is to inject it directly into their bodies. It works faster, but generates a large amount of pain. You can spare yourself a large amount of pain by absorbing phasewater orally, but the pain is more persistent inside your body. It is still a safer approach, but so much phasewater gets wasted in the process."

In other words, other Ascended Giants indeed did not have it easy. They needed to develop a formidable amount of pain tolerance in any case of their choice. The ones that could endure greater hardship could inject phasewater directly into their bloodstreams. This would temporarily exceed their maximum concentration and cause a certain amount of damage to their true bodies. However, their flesh also adapted faster to the increased concentration, thereby translating to better results going forward. Those who chose to ingest phasewater would suffer the mother of all stomach burns for a few days. The pain would persist for days and only gradually taper off later on. A significant amount of phasewater would end up elsewhere, leaving only a fraction of the initial dose to increase the Ascended Giant's phasewater concentration.

To be honest, the Dark Apostle thought both methods were crude and lacking in sophistication, but the problem was that the giants failed to figure out anything better. The alien phase lords must have developed more efficient methods, but they probably guarded their secrets quite well against their human foes.

It would be nice if the Bluejay Fleet could kidnap an enemy phase lord and interrogate him. The underlings of the Red Cabal probably knew a lot more secrets, especially if they were old.

"I need to raise my phasewater concentration to 50 percent as soon as possible." The Dark Apostle mentioned. "I am too vulnerable given my current status. I do not want to make it easy for assassins to take my head."

"We can try to do so by implanting more phasewater organs into your true body. We do not recommend you resort to other methods as that can be counterproductive. Your health is paramount."

The Mech Touch

Chapter 7248: Dualities

"I expected to talk to Ves, not his evil personality. With respect, can you retreat and give Ves control so that we can talk about matters of serious importance?"

"Ves is currently taking a well-deserved vacation after completing the Riot Mark III and almost killing Rosa Orfan. I am not inclined to bring him back right away. Let him finish his rest. You can tell me all about what you have accomplished in the meantime. Both of us share the same memories more or less, so informing me is the same as informing him. You don't need to waste any time."

The projection of Swordmaster Ketis gave the Dark Apostle a flat stare. "How exactly are you different from Ves?" she questioned.

"To be honest, I can't come up with a proper answer. We are different but the same. Ves likes to pretend as if he has gained a second companion spirit in the form of myself, but I feel kind of insulted with this comparison. I much prefer to regard myself as the part of Ves that embraces violence and has fully embraced the legacy of his Larkinson lineage. I am a born warrior. I can fight much better than my human self despite possessing the exact same true body and fighting skills. Admittedly, I don't understand all of the complicated math and science in his head. I 'know' all of the theory, but I can't use it to design a mech, let alone a Mekanos."

"I... see. I think I understand the gist of your explanation." The projection of the swordmaster mildly relaxed. "The two of you possess different specializations. Ves is strongly connected to what he calls his 'design flame'. This is the metaphysical construct that empowers our mech designs and vastly increases the efficiency of our technical work. You lack this connection, hence your inability to leverage 'your' technical skills, but that absence is filled with a much deeper and more profound connection to your powerful true body."

She grew intrigued. She was not entirely familiar with splitting up specializations. Ketis herself was fundamentally a mech designer with a strong connection to her own design seed. While she also considered herself a fighter, she was not technically a swordmaster. It was only when Sharpie lent her sword intent that Ketis could make the leap from mundane to extraordinary. Of course, Ketis' relationship with her companion spirit was not as tense and segregated as that of Ves and the Dark Apostle. While the relationship between the latter two did not appear to be as dysfunctional as described in the earlier reports, Ketis could still detect a lot of antipathy from the Dark Apostle to his original self. The two may have found an equilibrium that they could live with for the time being, but this did not resolve the fundamental conflict of interest between themselves. Both of them wanted to claim total possession of the same true body.

Even Ketis could not come up with a clear-cut answer on who deserved to own it more. As a swordmaster, Ketis could already ascertain that the Dark Apostle clearly mastered his true body to a far greater degree than Ves could ever manage. The second personality was born from his flesh and possessed a connection that she had only ever seen from martial phase lords that truly loved fighting. On the other hand, Ves was the original owner of his true body. He did not deserve to get bodysnatched by an unwelcome side of himself. If Ketis was in his position, he would feel just as upset towards the Dark Apostle. What a mess. It was clearly not in Ketis' place to resolve this troublesome matter.

So long as Ves and the Dark Apostle maintained the current status quo, Ketis saw no reason to meddle into this affair. She gazed suspiciously at the Dark Apostle, but ultimately decided that it did not matter if she continued to discuss business with Ves' other self. They were technically the same person, right?

"I will postpone discussions on our next mech design projects until he is ready to speak directly to me again." The female Journeyman decided. "The only topic of discussion then is the results from the latest mining expedition to the Blue Dimension."

The Dark Apostle perked up when he heard this. "Oh nice. Both of us were looking forward to this. How big is your haul this time?"

"Big." Ketis answered. "As I have told you before, I have been able to make a larger and long-lasting portal. Extending its longevity from 24 hours to 120 hours is a godsent to all of red humanity. Our clan along with all of the other major powers such as the Red Three, the Terran Alliance, the Rubarthan Pact, the Hunting Association and most notably the Cybernetic Empire have all taken excellent advantage of this interval. While their yields steadily declined as their mining vessels had to travel further and further away from the entry site, they still managed to obtain much more superdimensional matter than before."

"I don't care about what the other groups have gained. I only care about what we have managed to bring in. Tell me the results."

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The Dark Apostle looked as if he was a stimulant junkie who just heard that his supplier managed to import a huge stash from another state. He couldn't help himself. He felt a great attraction towards superdimensional matter. Whether that was because the phase whales called them the bones of the Elder Gods, he wasn't sure. All he knew was that he could put up a much better fight if he was fully equipped with superdimensional gear!

Ketis proceeded to summarize the Larkinson Clan's haul. "We have managed to harvest a large but not excessive amount of structure-grade superdimensional matter. We have chosen to deprioritize the mining of this inferior matter because it is more cost-effective for our mining vessels to travel further and find as numerous deposits of common and high-grade matter. As it stands, we have harvested more than enough low-grade matter to construct a single superdimensional megafortress. We can also use it to supply tens of thousands of ranged mechs with cheap superdimensional projectiles for up to a year."

Structure-grade superdimensional matter was very poor in quality. It was solely due to the fact that they were superdimensional in the first place that made them more valuable than phasewater, and only to a modest degree.

"Go on. No one cares about the low-grade stuff."

"We have harvested much more hull-grade superdimensional matter than before. Together with our old reserves, we have collected enough mid-grade matter to construct 13 sub-capital ships with a length of 500 meters. We can even use it all to produce a single space fortress that can endure brutal punishment and help defend a planet against an overwhelming invasion. However, doing this will leave very little hull-grade superdimensional matter left for other priorities."

The mention of a space station did not arouse any interest from the Dark Apostle. The Ascended Giant rolled his eyes. "Using superdimensional matter to build a stationary object in space is the stupidest idea that I have ever heard. Its poor mobility will make it easy for enemies to capture it. Then all of that superdimensional matter is lost. No. There are better uses for this stuff. I know that Ves has a lot of demand for it. He needs a large amount of it in order to further his own projects."

"The allocation of superdimensional matter is not up to you or Ves." Ketis reminded the Ascended Giant. "Our matriarch is the ultimate decision maker. She decides who gets what. You will need to send her your proposals. You will get what you want so long as you make a good case. Gaining a large haul this time does not necessarily mean we can afford to squander it all. Opening a

dimension breach that has lasted for 5 whole days is a strenuous activity that cannot be repeated in a short amount of time. We need to make our existing supply last for at least a year."

Ketis did not want to get stuck in a loop where she had to earn 400 AP before spending it all on another portal to the 365th dimension. It would not be fair for her as she would have no AP left to invest in her own development.

Even the Dark Apostle acknowledged that she deserved to take care of herself. "I am not disagreeing with you, and neither does my other self. You can take it easy for a time. Both of us are waiting for you to become a sword saint. How close are you to a breakthrough?"

"I am closer than before, but I cannot tell you the exact date when I am ready to take the next step. I am blazing my own trail here. I think I can already achieve a breakthrough in a year if I prioritize speed above everything else, but I want to do this right. I can't become a normal sword saint because without the Heavensword, I will not be able to make much of a difference amidst all of the mechs and battleships. Unlike you, my body will continue to remain small and frail."

"That does not have to remain this way. Why... don't we work together and figure out a way to turn you into a swordmaster as well as an Ascended Giant?"

"No. Absolutely not." Ketis vehemently shook her head! "I will not taint myself with alien influences. No offense, but I do not want to share my body with a 'Dark Mistress' or something. The very thought of it offends me. Besides, I do not think that the concept is even viable. Reformed Swordsmanship must remain as pure as possible. I can reluctantly agree with letting reformed swordsmen make use of Carmine mechs, but I do not want them to turn into Ascended Giants. They will lose focus and become too distracted by all of the needs of their body cultivation. No. We will find our own way, starting with myself. I will only become a sword ace pilot when I have found a path that can turn reformed swordsmanship into a viable means to resist our enemies in the current age."

Her ambition was great. While she was already able to defeat phase lords in her current condition, she relied far too heavily on the overbearing might of the Heavensword as opposed to her own gear and swordsmanship.

The Dark Apostle found it admirable that Ketis refused to grow complacent and take the Heavensword for granted. The relic weapon could separate from her hand at any time. It may also refuse to lend its formidable might to her during critical moments. Ketis could not stand the lack of control over her own weapon. This was why she continued to nurture her Bloodsinger to the point of turning it into Sharpie's life sword.

"Do you have any solid ideas on how to reach your goal?"

"Yes. I am already exploring a number of possible options." She said. "Some of them are admittedly more invasive than others. I have been collaborating with the Red Collective on this endeavor. Their expertise is very welcome. I am certain that I can succeed. The only question is how well the end result will turn out. I do not want Reformed Swordsmanship to turn into a joke just like how traditional swordsmanship became marginalized during the Age of Mechs. What the MTA has done to our practice is intolerable. I will not let the RA do the same in this age."

"Well, you are well on your way of doing so. The RC is becoming more and more powerful, especially now that I have put the Phase Lord Department in order. Helping me is the same as helping you. The more superdimensional matter you can send my way, the better. My giants and I will heavily rely on you to supply us and outfit us with superior arms and armor."

Chapter 7249: Superdimensional Shopping List

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The Dark Apostle and Ketis grew more comfortable with each other as they continued to talk with each other by remote.

The Ascended Giant was no longer as impulsive and obsessed in his own superiority as before.

Unlike many of his underlings, he understood much better how scary red humanity remained.

Sure, the puny humans were not doing so well at the moment, but that may be a temporary setback due to their lack of preparation at the start of the Red War.

In any case, the Dark Apostle heavily depended on superdimensional matter to maintain his leadership of the Phase Lord Department.

The better his gear, the more dramatic his victories and the greater his deterrence. Not only would he be able to stave off leadership challenges, but he would also earn enough prestige to convince red humanity to recognize the right for the Ascended Giants to become an independent race.

Nothing could be done while the Dark Apostle lacked the strength to pursue his ambitions.

"How much high-grade matter did the clan harvest this time?"

"A little less than expected." The projection of Ketis replied to Ves' other personality. "With the completion of the Riot Mark III, we exhausted almost all of our reserves of armor-grade and weapon-grade superdimensional matter. Our latest haul is significant, but not as much as we have hoped to obtain during the 5 days the portal remained open. We have tried our best, but we have only managed to harvest enough armor-grade superdimensional matter to construct just over 6 full superdimensional mechs, and 4 mid-sized melee weapons for those very same machines."

That did not sound like much. The Dark Apostle's expression fell. He was hoping for a lot more.

"That is... disappointing to hear." He said. "I know that Ves and Gloriana have already reserved enough high-grade superdimensional matter to convert the Lionheart Mark II and the Promethea Mark II into full superdimensional archemechs. What is left may be just enough to outfit me with a stopgap raiment."

"Stopgap raiment?"

The Dark Apostle grinned. "Yes' ultimate protection for us is a Polymetal mech. A full smart metal Carmine mech that is incredibly flexible and can easily be scaled up and down depending on our choices. It can fit into smaller indoor spaces, but it can also expand to a ratio of 5x, 10x or more depending on how much superdimensional smart metal can be produced. However, designing our personal Polymetal mech is a big project that will take 1 to 2 years to complete in his estimation. That does not leave me with anything, hence why I need a regular raiment that I can use for the time being."

The swordmaster furrowed her brows. "I know about the Polymetal mech, but you are being a tad bit impatient here. You are asking for a superdimensional raiment that will only be used for 2 years at most. I can imagine that you are eager to make a name for yourself, but there are many other good uses of armor-grade superdimensional matter. I need to calculate how much armor-grade superdimensional matter you need. Tell me your demands for your stopgap equipment."

The Dark Apostle waved his hand, transmitting a document that listed out his demands in bullet points. He also included a crude sketch that looked much worse than anything Ves could produce.

Ketis looked a little disgusted as she observed the sorry excuse of a draft.

"Well, this is definitely confirmation that you lack his touch. It is a good thing that you are familiar enough with his work to convey the most essential details."

"I don't want to fight like a brawler whose primary job is to take hits. I don't want to turn myself into a giant target dummy. I want to be a more nimble and maneuverable fighter. The more mobile I am, the more initiative I have. The greater my initiative, the greater my options. I never want to be left helpless on the battlefield. I can agree to sacrifice a bit of armor for this, but not too much. In short, I basically want to become the giant equivalent of a spearman mech or a hybrid mech wielding a spear."

The raiment that the Dark Apostle envisioned for himself was a dark suit of armor that completely enveloped him and conveyed a vague aura of menace and danger.

It was first and foremost designed to give good mobility and range of motion to an Ascended Giant. The ratio of 3.0x made him larger than the Ur-Titans, but not by an excessive degree. His mobility shouldn't be impacted too much, especially if the flight system was powerful enough.

Aside from being optimized for welding spears, the so-called Superdimensional Giant Regalia also had to carry a number of other armaments.

The selection of weapon systems was not too ambitious, but imposed quite a burden on the design of this raiment.

The Dark Apostle demanded a superior superdimensional spear of the same scale.

"Nobody will justify a spear that is 3 times the size of a normal mech spear that is made completely of weapon-grade superdimensional alloy." Ketis immediately said. "At most, you can turn the tip out of the most valuable variant of superdimensional matter, but we will not agree to using any more of it on the shaft. You will have to make do with cheaper and more abundant armor-grade superdimensional matter."

That did not sit well with the Dark Apostle. "Why not? The shaft is just as important as the tip. If I ever face an enemy that is equipped with a high-grade superdimensional sword, I want to be able to block and parry that weapon without worrying about my spear shaft getting sliced into half."

"That is unlikely to occur in most scenarios, giant. The native aliens only make use of relatively inferior alien-grade superdimensional alloys. Armor-grade weapons will easily hold up against such weapons, especially if the spear shaft is thick and solid enough. There is no need to spend any weapon-grade alloy to reinforce the shaft any further. At most, your fancy spear will become nicked and dented from all of the fighting, which Ves should easily be able to corrupt after the battle."

"What if the Red Cabal improved their tech and equipped their phase lords with high-grade superdimensional weapons?"

"Then you adapt." Ketis answered back. "I am not a mech designer who knows nothing about actual combat. A good fighter does not blame his gear if he ends up at a disadvantage. Any enemy can be solved if you are skilled and wise enough to make the appropriate adaptations. You can adopt a more cautious fighting style that encourages you to keep your distance and avoid clashing your spear against the enemy's weapon. A spear has good reach. Make use of it. That is all I can say."

Though the Dark Apostle wanted the best, inwardly he already expected this outcome.

There was a good likelihood that the Saint Commander would not object to the creation of a superior superdimensional spear where only the tip is made out of the most exclusive weapon-grade alloy.

They moved on to discussing some of the other armaments.

"These javelins are quite modest compared to your spear. You have not imposed heavy demands on them. Are you truly sure you are fine with making them out of hull-grade superdimensional alloy?"

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"Alien-grade is acceptable as well if it is abundant enough." The Dark Apostle replied. "The reason why I am fine with mid-grade superdimensional javelins is because they are inherently designed to be disposable. If you look closer, I want to design them with the capacity to explode, just like the spears that I used during the leadership challenge. I am not necessarily going to blow them up in every instance, but I want the option to do so without feeling like I have thrown away a fortune's worth of superdimensional matter. I want to produce them in a large batch so that I have plenty of spares in reserve. I only intend to carry up to 5 of them in battle, though."

"To many people, it will seem that way." Ketis grimaced at the thought of all of that wasted superdimensional matter. "Those previous explosions seem violent enough to leave minimal salvage behind. These javelins all appear to conform to the 3.0x ratio that you have chosen. That means that you will have to use up enough hull-grade superdimensional matter to construct a small spaceship at the very least. Depending on how often you get into fights and how many times you toss those javelins, you can run out within 2 years or less."

"That will have to do. That hull-grade stuff is much easier to get than the higher-grade stuff. I do not think that Casella will object to using it up like this. Not every enemy is worth getting hurt by my exploding javelins. I will only reserve them for the truly serious enemies. Oh, I also want to reserve a bit of hull-grade superdimensional matter to construct better harpoons for one of my strategy:"

"I will take it up with the matriarch, but remember that the Red Collective has brought back their own haul of superdimensional matter. Maybe you should ask the colliers to outfit your giants with superior gear."

"Perhaps."

Ketis continued to study the remainder of the design. The shoulder-mounted ranged cannons and the chest-mounted integrated armaments did not interest her too much. Whether the Dark Apostle wanted to mount missile launchers or transphasic hyper weapons did not interest her that much.

The nature of a raiment meant that there was not much room for internals that could strengthen and support the performance of these ranged weapons.

This made it difficult for them to pack a truly powerful punch. Since the Dark Apostle was not a high-ranking mech pilot, he could not amplify the performance of these armaments beyond what reality permitted.

The only reason why most enemies still needed to take these weapon systems a little more seriously was due to their greater scale.

They would probably be powerful enough to zap down alien phasefighters and soften up enemy warships for follow-up attacks, but their effectiveness against enemy champions was highly questionable.

Maybe that was one of the reasons why the Giant Regalia had not turned into the equivalent of a first-class multipurpose mech. It could have fitted way more weapon systems, but Ves and the Dark Apostle had made the sensible decision to keep it fairly minimal.

What drew her attention a lot more was the backup melee weapon.

"Murder Knife Mark II?"

"Yes. I used the original Murder Knife Mark I to harvest the lives of two Ascended Giants. The D-arm has fed from their energies and grown stronger and more mysterious as a consequence. While Ves designed and built it in haste, I think that there is much potential in this weapon. It would be a shame to recycle it like Ves had done with the rest of his improvised gear. I want to commission you to take the original Murder Knife and properly reforge it into a full weapon-grade superdimensional D-arm with a ratio increase from 1.0x to 3.0x. I know that I am asking much from you, but would you be interested in this project?"

He was right. He was indeed making a big demand. Ketis felt irritated that she was not allowed to develop a customized knife for the Dark Apostle from ground zero.

Instead, she had to take this piece of demonized junk and work hard to figure out how to reforge it into a proper superdimensional blade while still preserving Ves' original vision as well as its D-arm properties.

Despite all of these problems, Ketis did not take much time to nod her head. "Fine. Send it to the expeditionary fleet. I will do my best to figure out how to work around its... eccentric properties. I admit that a part of me is curious whether it is even possible to reforge a D-arm. Just be aware that there may be a chance that it will break during my attempts to upgrade it. If that happens, I would be more than happy to compensate you with a proper superdimensional knife."

Chapter 7250: The Importance of Resistance

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"You do not need to help with developing the spear and javelins. Ves will approach Dulo Voiken and other relevant specialists to make them better. We just need enough mid and high-grade superdimensional matter to get started. It would be great if we can fully meet our needs at 3x."

Swordmaster Ketis might not be the matriarch, but she was an incredibly important voice in the clan. She was the patron of the expeditionary fleet, the Swordmaidens, the Heavensworders and plenty of other worshipful clansmen.

She might not have a chance of becoming the matriarch of the Larkinson Clan in the current period, but as long as she continued to grow along her current trajectory, she had an excellent chance of taking over once Saint Commander Casella Ingvar stepped down.

Of course, this was still a distant scenario. Casella had just gotten started. It was unimaginable that she would relinquish her role without effecting large-scale changes to the clan. She needed to make her mark before she could even think about moving on to greater affairs.

It was therefore quite important for the Dark Apostle to earn her favor.

He was not Ves, so he could not automatically leech off his weaker self. He needed to go out of his way to cultivate a cordial relationship.

However, it was not easy to earn her trust. Ketis had not met Ves' alter ego in person, but she had heard plenty of stories from other clansmen, including his wife!

"A spear scaled for a phase lord that is 3 times the size of a mech can be a costly weapon to make." She said. "Your draft design indicates that you want to stick to a relatively standard length of 1.5 times your length, or 4.5 times the length of a typical mech. If the shaft is made out of armor-grade superdimensional alloy, then it should be thin. We should keep the waste to a minimum. I suggest you either make the shaft hollow, hollow with a core of a different material or shape it into a spiral that is intertwined with other alloys."

The Dark Apostle frowned. He did not quite understand the differences between the three choices.

"I originally wanted a solid armor-grade superdimensional alloy shaft that is thick enough to withstand repeated attacks from other superdimensional weapons. I do not want to wield a staff that feels too thin and fragile in my grasp. It is especially difficult to grip a thinner spear with gauntlets. I will leave it to Ves to choose which solution is the best for us. We just want enough armor-grade superdimensional matter to form a decent base."

Ketis smiled. "He should be able to understand the priorities of our clan and keep his request economical enough. The same consideration applies to the tip of the spear. We cannot afford to make it too big. Try to rein in your expectations. It only needs to be long and thick enough to punch through superdimensional armor."

"Understood. I would appreciate all the help that you can give me. The sooner we receive the necessary superdimensional matter, the sooner Ves can complete my combat gear. Once my body has returned to peak condition, I can finally do more than sit around and engage in light spars and repetitive weapon drills."

"Eager for action, are you? I can understand." The projection of the female swordmaster smiled. "I am sure that Ves will create the best and most eccentric gear for you. Knowing what kind of shenanigans he is up to, he will definitely not restrain himself when it comes to his own protection. By the way, will he continue to make use of his superdimensional spear and knife once he has completed his ambitious Polymath mech, or will he reinvent them in order to adapt to his latest regalia?"

The Dark Apostle was able to answer this question easily enough.

"Unless radical new tech has come out that has completely changed the game, I do not think he intends to reinvent them anytime soon once they are done. We will continue to add them to our loadout whenever we intend to deploy on the battlefield at 3x. We will probably retire our stopgap raiment and keep it as a backup option. Our plan is to create various different weapons at different sizes and keep them in reserve. As an Ascended Giant, I can never know for certain whether I want to fight at 1x, 3x or 10x."

That caused Ketis to furrow her brows. "This is a complicated matter. I never put much thought on how to arm 'Ascended Giants' such as yourself. The fact that you can change your sizes is a great advantage, but it is not that helpful if your gear cannot automatically match your size. It makes much more sense why Ves is eager to develop a Polymetal mech for himself. It would be great if he can develop a weapon that can also change its scale. In fact, if he can create a Polymetal mech, then he can extend its smart metal to form a blade or a spear with ease. It is not strictly necessary to create a separate arsenal."

The Dark Apostle shook his head in rejection. "Ves has thought of that, but he does not like it. That is basically treating the Polymetal mech as his weapon, which is not the main point. Weapons like the Heavensword, the Bitter Scimitar, the Decapitator, the Murder Knife and etc. are powerful because they are self-contained and singularly designed to serve an offensive purpose. They possess their own artifact spirits that empower them even further. I want that for myself. I do not mind it if I have to juggle multiple different weapons for myself. None of them will become my 'life weapon'. The only pact that I am willing to make is with my future Polymetal mech."

"Understandable." Ketis nodded.

She wondered whether it was possible for her to form a Blood Pact with a Carmine mech when she already formed a Life Sword Pact with her Bloodsinger.

It may just be possible considering that they belonged to two entirely separate categories.

Ketis was not in a hurry to pilot a Carmine mech anytime soon, so this point was moot.

Perhaps she should revisit this topic when Ves completed his vaunted Polymetal mech. He had described it as the perfect solution for mech designers.

The malleability and reprogrammability of smart metal mechs allowed mech designers to add their own solutions to their personal machines.

After the Dark Apostle had issued his demands and became satisfied with the feedback he received from Ketis, the two began to talk about other subjects.

Ketis felt a bit strange as she continued to converse with the Ascended Giant.

He possessed Ves' face and shared numerous of the traits of her former mentor, but the Dark Apostle was very much a different person entirely.

She felt as if she was talking to Ves' black sheep brother or cousin. It was certainly a novel experience for her. The Ascended Giant apparently knew everything Ves knew, but possessed a very different perspective on different matters.

Although he called himself the Dark Apostle, he did not really come across as a dark and evil cultist.

Yet the fact that he still embraced this name was a cause for concern. It certainly conveyed his intentions to wield dark and dangerous powers.

Sooner or later, he would be in over his head.

Ketis needed to be ready to respond with force if the Dark Apostle lost perspective and turned into a threat to the Larkinson Clan.

"Have you been following the developments of the voribug invasion? Have you heard about all of the hives that have emerged in the last week?"

"I have." She said. "My fellow Larkinsons and I have recently noticed that the native aliens are losing momentum at the frontlines. Their reinforcements are being diverted to slow down the voribug advance in their own territories. The loss of many productive sun systems has introduced greater delays in their logistical network. While the native aliens are still determined to collide with the mutated voribugs to finish off red humanity together, the insects are so feral and hostile to everyone that they cannot be reasoned or bargained with. I think they are in for a hard time, especially when there is much more alien territory to grab than human territory."

Her words made a lot of sense. While red humanity was weak in the new frontier, it put up a great amount of resistance. Several years of war where humans had always been on the defensive had hardened them against invasions.

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In other words, red humanity was already fully prepared to fight a defensive war on the onset.

The same could not be said for the native aliens. Their absolute numbers advantage along with the protection of their phase lords had always allowed them to go on the offensive.

Even if scattered human forces raided their staging points and supply dumps, the damage to the alien war effort was always negligible.

When it came to infrastructure, humans were nothing less than ants compared to the aliens.

The native aliens did not even bother to fortify many star systems, especially the ones located further away from human-occupied space.

Red humanity simply did not possess the capacity to raid so deep into alien space, at least for the time being.

This was why the mutated voribugs practically enjoyed a feast.

While red humanity at the Rubarthan border regions fought tooth and nail for every sun system, the alien territories fell like dominoes.

Due to the Red Cabal's deliberate strategic choice to inflict a fatal or crippling blow to red humanity first before addressing the voribug menace, the latter was able to expand much faster into large swathes of poorly defended alien territories!

The 3 hives assigned to fight against the native aliens were expanding much faster than the 3 hives struggling to capture human territories!

"I kind of feel disappointed at the native aliens." The Dark Apostle admitted. "Their lack of resistance against the Chorus Hive, the Chalice Hive and the Simex Hive is letting them balloon in numbers. If the native aliens completely drop the ball, they will devour the entire Red Ocean before finally turning all of their might against human-occupied space. By then, we will be flooded by so many voribugs that even god pilots will get exhausted to death. No one can withstand this galactic plague when it has accumulated to this point."

Ketis grimaced. "This is why your work is important. You and Ves need to go out there and figure out a way to block the invading voribugs more effectively. In this threeway struggle, we are the weakest party. We don't have as much territory as the native aliens, and we do not reproduce as quickly as the voribugs. What we do have is the best technology, the most effective troops and the strongest champions. That is not enough in my opinion."

"What do you think red humanity needs in order to gain the upper hand against these two enemies?"

"I have numerous ideas, but many of them are unrealistic." She sighed. "It would be great if we can somehow turn the two against each other to the point they completely neglect us. We can still do this if we can shore up our defenses and develop effective countermeasures against both. We do not necessarily have to go on the offensive. We simply have to hold onto our existing territories

and not lose any further. The stiffer our resistance, the more we can redirect our enemies against each other."

That actually sounded like a viable strategy, but it hinged on whether the native aliens and mutated voribugs were willing to overlook the stubborn but relatively 'small' red humans.

The Dark Apostle thought that was too good to be true. If the Red Cabal and the Devourer Queen had any intelligence, they would know that red humanity posed a huge hidden threat due to its amazing potential.

This was why red humans could not afford to take it easy.